

## De Terra

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Relationships:	<a href="#">Ranboo &amp; Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream &amp; Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo &amp; TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo &amp; Toby Smith   Tubbo &amp; TommyInnit</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Cara   CaptainPuffy</a>
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# De Terra

by [Hellenite](#)

## Summary

He didn't think he'd ever get the chance to do this, travel the stars with someone that cares about him, get out from under the oppressive thumb of his family, be free, be himself, and Ranboo's trying to hang on to what he has now as hard as he can, but everything keeps crumbling out from under him.

# Lithosphere

## Chapter Notes

Are you ready?

Also if there's any spelling mistakes it's on Gracie /j

Please mind tags! They and the rating are there for a reason.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"Everything changes, but nothing is truly lost."*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

In the distance, the warehouse glows in the night like a beacon, lit up in so many stupid, obvious ways, it's not difficult at all to mark entrances and where cameras are stationed, even if you didn't have night vision like he does. Absentmindedly picking at the corded bracelet around his wrist, Ranboo sits crouched on a nearby rooftop and waits patiently for the next guard rotation to pass, mental map in his head rotating and keeping track of the patrols easily.

He memorized the facility layout before they left HQ, but he might as well be looking at it pulled up in front of him, imagines pinching and zooming in on certain areas, claw worrying a loose strand of cord while he thinks about his point of entry.

There's a brief buzz in one of his ears and it flicks automatically at the ticklish sensation, not even a second later a cheery voice filtering through and making him grin real and slow, *"Doing okay up there Boo boy?"*

"Mmm hmm, second round's almost clear, you ready with the Eshachi?" He murmurs back, releasing the receiver and waits patiently for Tubbo to come back on, tail involuntarily dragging behind him happily when he hears his voice, the smile so clear in it, *"Yup, just don't get yourself stuck again and we'll be outta here in like fifteen."*

Huffing under his breath, Ranboo knows *exactly* what he's talking about, mind pulling the memory for him of that job on Xotriorus, the one with the crate of unstable crynthon ion batteries, how he misjudged his teleportation jump and ended up wedged behind a power panel, took Tubbo twenty minutes to find him and then another ten to help get him out, couldn't move he was laughing so hard.

Ranboo remembers every detail of that mission, the balmy temperature of that planet, snow crunching under his boots and how it made Tubbo's breath fog, can still perfectly recall the layout of that supply depot and easily pull up the security shift changes, but what stands out the most to him is the brief snatches of Tubbo he caught from behind power cords.

It bleeds warm and heady through his mind then, the wonderful sound of Tubbo out of breath from giddy joy, how he started crying he was laughing so much, cheeks and tip of his nose pink, dark blue eyes crinkled at the corners, very vivid and very alive, and Ranboo can't stop it bubbling out of his mind all light and airy and devastating, *love you love you so much Ancients love you more than anything-*

He imagines slamming the door so fast on that, staggers away from it in his mind with his hands digging into the back of his neck, forces his attention on literally *anything* else, runs through the compendium he has of every infectious disease currently active in this sector and it's okay, he's fine, *he's got this under contr-*

*Blazing shape of him in your arms that night can't sleep won't sleep not going to waste a second of this elegant way he flies and bright light in his smile like the dazzling rays of a sun hands on the back of your neck and in your hair around your waist so warm all the time searing life back into you your sun you love him love him so much-*

Ranboo's fingers spasm, about to go for skin, anything to get *his head back under control he knows how to behave stop you have to stop wall it off you know better than this know how to behave he doesn't love you no one ever has you need to let it go-*

"You good, Boo? I was just joking..." Tubbo says, downturned lilt to his voice, like he's worried he's offended, *too good too kind don't deserve him you've never deserved anything you've ever had-* and Ranboo bares his teeth, can practically hear that deep monotone right beside him.

He keeps his eyes straight ahead, watching the last patrol pass, but he can still see the dark figure looming out of the corner of his vision, just waiting for Ranboo to acknowledge him, but he forces his hands flat on the rooftop and keeps his head in place.

*I don't have time for you go away*, he thinks viciously and hits his receiver before Tubbo can get really worried, says light and even and *normal*, like he doesn't see specters, like his mind isn't so incredibly wrong, "Oh no, I'm fine. Sorry, got distracted counting patrols, I'm going now."

He pauses for a second, giving himself the perfect window for if Tubbo *does* say anything, it'll be lost to the void as Ranboo dematerializes. Freezing fire races up from his core, reality bending and warping around him, folding back in on itself as he forces his way through the layers of this dimension, tension tightens across his entire body and then he's stepping out into the center of the warehouse near instantly.

"I'm in." Ranboo whispers into his receiver, timer flicking up in his mind now alongside his map, counting down until Tubbo's supposed to be by with the Eshachi, does a quick scan of the building and snorts when he can't find a single camera in sight.

*Idiots*

Stepping lightly across to the shipments stacked near the bay doors, Ranboo skirts around them, eyes scanning fast over labels trying to find their objective. *Tritium three fifty seven-used for the manufacturing of plastisteel, goes into the refinement process...Polimuon-*

*chemical compound for lubricating fast moving parts, substandard to ah, there it is...Hwqwu- and a lot of it, has longer lasting properties but at the cost of being extremely expensive and-*

“*Knock knock.*” Tubbo’s voice sings in his ear, and Ranboo spins around, loping over to the bay door and hits the release lever, skips back a few steps as it starts to grind open, blast of wind rushing in through the gap. Over the sound of grating metal gears, the humming sound of the Eshachi’s engines idling sing around him, and Ranboo can’t stop the smile lifting his lips seeing their ship hovering a few feet off the ground above the landing pad.

There’s a fresh coat of paint on the hull, burnt oranges and warm greys, fiery red lines crisp and sharp, cutting patterns over the wings, around the turbines, vibrantly outlining the Syndicate logo stamped proudly on the sides. Honestly, Ranboo never really cared much about ships before a few months ago, but you couldn’t spend any time with Tubbo and not develop an appreciation for machinery and spacecraft.

And he’s probably biased as hell, but Ranboo thinks the Eshachi is one of the finer examples of what spacecraft can be, all sleek lined and unarguably graceful, clearly well loved in how it’s maintained.

Tubbo takes good care of it, does all of the repair work that needs doing and general upkeep himself, and Ranboo helps where he can, mostly fetching tools and providing company. The reason he doesn’t do more isn’t due to an educational gap, Tubbo is a phenomenal teacher and he’s always been quick to pick things up, but rather that Ranboo knows how much it means to him, taking care of their ship.

There’s something unique and very special about watching Tubbo work, the little furrow his brow drops into, dark eyes hooded in thought, how intense they get, entire focus narrowed down to whatever he’s working on, hands moving swift and confident. His passion for what he’s doing is so evident any time he’s tending to the Eshachi, Ranboo gets swept up by it, hopelessly falls further into this thing he’s been trying to get out of since Tjhia-Yuet.

The Eshachi touches down and kicks up a huge swirling cloud of particles, thankfully enough of a distraction that saves Ranboo from the yawning chasm of his own thoughts. He twists back around to go try and find the objective when his receiver crackles, barely audible over the droning whine of the Eshachi’s turbines spinning fast in standby, “*You find the aotio-whatsit yet? ‘Cause we got like-*”

“Two minutes and thirty eight seconds and counting.” Ranboo recites dutifully, clambering over a stack of crates looking for what was described as *‘big ass off green barrels’*, “I’m still looking, there’s more here than I thought.”

“*M’kay, lemme know if you need any help.*” Tubbo says and then the line cuts off, leaving Ranboo to continue trying to find the aotionomium, hopping up onto a crate for a better vantage point, timer ticking down in his head and causing a brief flare of anxiety. It’s not a bad feeling, not like this at least, less nauseous and more excited, anticipation curling hotly in his chest, *the thrill of the chase.*

Ranboo doesn’t know what it says about him that he’s come to kinda crave the feeling, but then again...he’s not really alone in it, because Tubbo’s the same way, cackles like a madman

when they're outrunning other ships, grins wide and sharp with too many teeth as they're sprinting down backroads, wings fluttering in exhilaration, blasters clutched in his hands.

They're both a little strange, Ranboo thinks, slipping in between two containers taller than him, but that's okay, they have each other now, and it sits like a comforting weight in his chest, settles in his legs and arms, keeps him grounded, feels like he's not going to accidentally slip over the edge this time.

He pops out of the other side of the gap and makes a brief noise of victory, seeing the neat row of large, slightly green barrels with warning labels slapped on them, counts five in total, just like their contact told them there would be, and reaches up to his receiver, "Found'em, bringing them back now."

"*Yo way to go bossman, now remember don't grab them all at once like-*" but his voice cuts out as Ranboo teleports, hand wrapped around the lip of a barrel each, rocking them briefly up off the ground so they'll go with him. It always takes a little more out of him to jump with objects, especially ones this big, and Ranboo stumbles as he materializes in the cargo hold, very lightheaded and unsteady on his feet, falls backwards with a squawk, dragging a barrel over in the process.

"What'd I *just say!*" Tubbo calls down to him, laughter edging in around his words as the horrendous clanging noise fades out, and Ranboo gets to his feet, shakes his head to clear it and yells back up, "That I'm the greatest partner? Incredibly useful and an asset to this mission? A paragon of wit and intelligence and-"

"Oh *shut up*, you dickh-" Last of his sentence lost to the sharp pressure of slipping through reality, and it's less jarring this time dropping out of the jump, but Ranboo can't waste any more of their rapidly dwindling time, grabs two barrels again. He keeps his footing when he goes back to the Eshachi despite how the cargo hold undulates around him, and he should probably take a breather, but his mental timer is close to hitting the *zero* mark and they need to be out of here before then.

Sucking in a sharp inhale, Ranboo closes his eyes to fight off the growing nausea, tries to remember the exact coordinates for where he's wanting to go. His mind is his greatest asset, a usually never wavering compendium of information that he can draw from at will, but it's hazy with sudden fatigue, must spit out the wrong coordinates because next thing Ranboo knows, he's wedged in between two shipping crates.

There's barely enough space for him to be here, metal pressing him so tightly it's kinda hard to breathe, which is doing *nothing* to help clear his head, and Ranboo takes small sips of air, actual panic starting to shake to life. It's okay, he's going to be okay, he tells himself, he'll be able to get out of here in just a second, all he has to do is take small breaths and wait for his mind to refocus, simple easy, he can do this, *he's going to-*

*-mess up the entire mission, timer will have run out before you can even get yourself out of here*, a deep voice says right next to him and ancients no, not *now*- *what a disgrace, can't even handle a single jump in under a click*, and Ranboo can't turn his head but *he can see him there anyway*, teal cape snapping behind his legs, striding past without looking at him

*never looking at him- your poor performance reflects badly on the entire family, does it make you happy, dragging us all down with you?*

*Shut up! Go away I don't have to listen to you, Ranboo's claws flex as much as they can, pinned in place but screeching horribly where they drag along metal, and it just makes him laugh, an echoing sound that freezes Ranboo's blood solid, is that what you tell yourself? Just to make it easier? Well...it won't change anything, you know all of it's true, you've always known-*

*It's NOT! You're a liar and a manipulator and I- and I don't b-believe you anymore-*

*Oh? That so...head cocked to the side, heavy gold bands of the Daysetter crown curling over ears and shining starkly against dark hair streaked silver, but he still won't turn around, never has never will shadow on the wall doesn't exist, broad, unyielding shoulders the only thing filling Ranboo's vision, then why am I still here? Why do you still see me? Unless-*

*STOP IT- stop it stop it s-stop i-it-!*

*-unless you're lying, which of course you are, that's all you do, lie and manipulate, image wavering in front of him, pulsating fast with how hard his heart's going, anger freezing his fingers and hurting in his lungs, you lie to everyone, yourself, the people around you, that partner of yours, shut up stop it he doesn't have to listen anymore can't breathe- waste of space waste of time- go away can't breathe go away go away gO AWA- shouldn't have bothered teleporting back up-*

Ranboo throws himself into the folds between reality with a scream, goes crashing to the ground somewhere out in the warehouse, ears ringing and claws cracking into the floor, scrabbling like crazy trying to ground him on the slick surface. *Ancients*, it feels like there's no gravity in here, like he's going to go sailing off into empty air, *no teleporting back up this time*, and he chokes on an inhale, mind fracturing apart nothing to hold onto nothing to keep him here right over the edge can't s-stop can't k-keep himself to-together *r-right o- over good r-ridd-*

*Don't go, Boo*, whispers warm right next to his ear and Ranboo would know that voice anywhere, turns his head frantically and sees his cariad crouched next to him, smile like starshine, dark blue of his eyes the same velvet as the night sky, undeniable tender light in them, almost like he- I-like he lov- and Ranboo swallows hard when Tubbo stretches a hand out, *stay here...please? You'll stay with me, right?*

It feels like sunshine where his fingers touch at Ranboo's face, small points of contact that glow and spin through the mess his mind tangled up into, smoothing out all the bits and pieces until Ranboo can fit them back together, until things make sense again, until he opens his eyes and Tubbo's gone, just him propped up on his elbows in a warehouse that's now blaring with alarms.

Scrambling to his feet, Ranboo sways and has to throw a hand out to keep himself upright, uses the other to fumble around at his receiver, eventually gets the button and all but yells, "T-Tubbo! What's-?"



*“Queens past! Are you okay I-”* His voice comes back through sharp and jumpy before it cuts out, faint rumbling in the background that Ranboo places as photon cannons discharging, and his heart lurches painfully in his chest, *botched the mission useless disgrace can't do anything right-*

*“Fucking asswipe I swear-! FUCK OFF MAN- a-are you okay?”* Tubbo demands, clear his attention is split between not getting shot down and worrying over Ranboo- *what an inconvenience what a nuisance go take that lon- shut UP! Not now!* -and he bares his teeth, knows he messed up, but h-he can fix it, *he can still fix it*, it isn't ruined yet.

There's just the one barrel left, *he can do this*, and Ranboo stumbles back over to it, latches onto the lip of it one-handed, mind running fast with numbers and trajectories, uses the other to hit his receiver, “I-I'm fine- I- c-can you um, s-swing back by the l-landing pad?”

*“I mean- yeah- but I can't land right now- SHIT-”* Loud crackle snap of an explosion, hopefully not one that hit the Eshachi, but Tubbo's the best pilot he's ever known, *he's got this*, and Ranboo's grip tightens around the lip of the barrel because he's got to do his part now, “That's fine, just let m-me know when you're four milliseconds away from the center of it.”

*“What're you...RANBOO! You can't jump while I'm going-”* Tubbo cuts out again but it seems intentional this time, and he's back on a second later yelling, *“Over three thousand kilometers per hour!”*

“Yes I can, now just do it.” Ranboo fires back, has the exact point calculated in his head for where the Eshachi *should* sweep past, would drop him safely in the center of the cargo hold, but Tubbo continues doggedly, *“Are you insane-?”*

*Punch to the gut what's wrong with you mind shattered into a thousand pieces never put them back together right leaving cracks for things to crawl out of poor little brother- GET. IT. TOGETHER-*

*“-If you miss you're going to get yourself killed! Just meet me- shit- somewhere outside.”*

“T-There's still one barrel left Tubbo, *I can't leave it.*” Ranboo stresses because the mission parameters stated they needed to get all the aotionomium in this storehouse and *he can't leave it*, they're not going to fail the mission because of *him*, because his head's broken and wrong and he lost control of it for a second, “The mission states-”

*“Fuck the fucking mission!”* Tubbo's voice blares loudly in his ear, and his hair stands up on end having that anger directed *at him* and not whoever Tubbo's flying against right now, dark, chained up door rattling ominously in his mind, *“You're not doing that! You're NOT! You can't, Ranboo, do you understand me? You can't-!”*

*See even he doesn't believe in you, absolute disgrace*, the figure on his left intones solemnly, and Ranboo almost lets go of the barrel to take a swing at him, knows it won't do anything but make himself more frustrated, so he digs his fingers in harsher and yells into the receiver, *“Yes I can! Will you just do it and trust me!”*

Tubbo doesn't respond but Ranboo slips his eyes closed, pictures the landing pad in his mind, breathes in, sees the Eshachi soaring past, turbines spinning faster than his eyes can track, vibrant yellow glowing in the night like miniature suns, *warm hands on the back of your neck in your hair touching under your eye*, breathes out and waits for the-

*"Four out-"*

And he's gone, has one passing thought that if he is wrong, if he did mess up even slightly, Tubbo's right and he's going to die, ripped apart instantly, *at least it'd be over fast-* but then he's crashing into the dimly lit interior of the cargo hold, goes flying as the Eshachi pitches to the side sharply.

"You alright?" Tubbo hollers from up in the cockpit, Ranboo slamming into another wall before he gets a chance to reply, groans at where some metal paneling digs into his spine, knows he's going to be sore tomorrow and shouts back, "Y-Yeah!"

"Good! Now get *the fuck up here* so I can yell at you properly!"

*Wow, what an incentive*, Ranboo thinks bitterly, hauling his aching body up the ladder rungs, pauses before he climbs out of the chute in case Tubbo dives suddenly, but it seems like he's evened out in his flying, so Ranboo cautiously lifts himself up.

"They give up?" He guesses, staggering into the cockpit and drops down in his chair, shoulder pulling uncomfortably, and he winces, digs fingers into the bruised muscle. Tubbo's still focused on the viewport, hands flitting over controls as he begins their ascent out of Goi's atmosphere, spares Ranboo a glance though as he says, "Yeah, they must've assumed we didn't get anything-"

And Ranboo's literally seconds away from voicing his relief when he hears a sharp inhale, *here it comes storm on the horizon*, and thuds his head back against his seat, slipping his eyes closed as Tubbo fumes, "-but what *in the actual fuck* were you *thinking*? That stunt was beyond stupid, beyond idiotic a-and *reckless and-!*"

"It worked, didn't it?" Ranboo mutters darkly, sees in his mind that door he tries to keep bolted at all times slowly losing its locks, chains falling off and thudding on the ground, black, skeletal hands starting to claw out from around the sides. He can hear it faintly, howling past him like the frozen winds of the endless night, *spoiled self centered should've let him shoot me wish I'd never met you*, digs his claws sharply into the thick corded bracelet around his wrist, wishes for half a heartbeat that it *was his skin-*

"-do you have *any idea how-* h-how...s-shit-*fuck*, hey, Boo, hey I-I'm sorry. Here- lemme just-" Tubbo stammers mournfully, tapping around at the console, and the engines spike in pitch sharply, heralding their jump to lightspeed.

Ranboo barely registers it though, door hanging half open in front of him, inky skeletal faces grinning through the gap, their long, spindly fingers desperately scrabbling to push it the rest of the way open, and he jumps when he feels something touch his arm, thinking for half an insane second that it's *them*.

“Sorry-! Sorry, should’ve asked- i-is touch good or bad right now?” Tubbo asks softly, hand retracting immediately, and he’s been so careful, ever since- *dark walls and hands bound tight behind you cord pressing into your throat blade a second later gonna sing for us songbird* -and the darkness is suddenly oppressive and too much, and Ranboo snaps his eyes open.

The blurry white blue lines of hyperspace streak past the viewport, methodical and almost hypnotic, helps lull his pounding heart to the point that Ranboo feels okay enough to look to the side, sees Tubbo crouched by his armrest with a concerned pinch to his face.

He’s got that little furrow between his brows, the one he gets when he’s working on the Eshachi, and Ranboo smiles ruefully, *think I’m like your ship think you can fix what’s wrong with me*, but there’s such a determined light in Tubbo’s eyes, his smile turns a little more genuine, *maybe maybe if anyone could do it it’d be you*, and he unlatches his claws, whispering, “Touch’s good.”

*Always good always good with you please don’t leave stay here with me please lo-* cracking boom as he violently slams that door shut.

Tubbo reaches for his hands and Ranboo meets him halfway, threading their fingers together, Tubbo’s other set moving across his knuckles and tracing veins, the warmth they radiate singeing him but it burns in the best way, like the hot slide of alcohol down your throat, like adrenaline and euphoria, like the reminder that he’s *alive*.

“I’m sorry for shouting.” Tubbo murmurs, eyes never leaving Ranboo’s and he’s always done that, made sure he’s looking at him when he speaks, turns whenever Ranboo asks questions or needs to get his attention, meets him head on as much as he can, “I-It’s not an excuse, but I- I was just *so* worried, I-I lost my temper. I’m so sorry, Boo.”

“I forgive you.” Ranboo says because that’s what he’s supposed to, isn’t supposed to say *it’s alright* if it’s not, and *that* door never is, but he tries to forget about it, hopes maybe one day it’ll disappear, skin raising in gooseflesh hearing a deep, *lie you know it’s staying, but all you do is lie to yourself to try and make things easier, pathetic-*

Whatever *he’s* whispering gets lost though as Tubbo drags a set of fire bright fingers up under the cuff of his jacket, stroking along the sides of his wrist, effectively snaps Ranboo back to here and now, where it’s just the two of them, safe inside their ship, millions of lightyears from Annwyl and every horrible thing he left behind.

“What happened back there? You didn’t answer me for a good few minutes.” Tubbo asks softly in an even voice, no judgment whatsoever, and Ranboo sighs, feeling grounded enough to admit, “I- I misjudged a jump and um, got stuck...it triggered a uh, a...ya’know, a p-panic attack.”

*Panic attack, right that’s what you call them*, a snide voice chirps over his shoulder and really, *really*, her too, Ancient’s he can’t catch a break today, *never call them what they actually are, ‘brief bouts of insanity’ ...don’t you think you should tell him? That you’re absolutely crazy?*

*Get lost and take father with you*, Ranboo snips back and she scoffs but apparently listens for once, leaving him with a quiet mind that feels emptier than it should, and that's not good, that *can't be good*, but then Tubbo is brushing loose hair out of his eyes, fingertips just barely grazing his forehead and Ranboo forgets about anything else.

"I'm so sorry, Boo. Do you need anything? I-I know it was kinda stressful for a while." Tubbo says gently, the hand that was touching at his hair dropping away and Ranboo chases after it before he can stop himself, swallows hard and hopes Tubbo didn't notice.

*Stop it behave you're going to make it weird doesn't feel the same way lose him if you don't behave know how to behave*, and he shakes his head, taking solace in what he can get, Tubbo sitting across from him and the occasional hands in his, and that's enough, he can be happy with that, "I-I'm okay now. Thank you...f-for worrying."

"Of course." Tubbo says like it should be obvious, but it honestly never has been, the idea that people could care and worry about him such a foreign concept before the two of them met. Ranboo hadn't really understood what it meant to be cared for until they crash landed on that sandy hellhole in the wake of Osiron, when Tubbo first started paying attention to him, started noticing things Ranboo never thought anyone would.

At the time, he was terrified because Tubbo caught on to all of his tells so fast, to the point that Ranboo felt like he couldn't hide from those piercing, dark eyes. That panic slowly turned into comfort though, because Tubbo easily got things that were hard for him to express, seemed to understand him better than anyone else ever had.

It was kind of alarming, how quickly Ranboo latched onto the idea that Tubbo was his cariad, *his one and only*, and even after months of telling himself to drop it, that Tubbo didn't care for him in that way, *didn't love him*, Ranboo still can't seem to get himself to move on.

They were friends, good friends, closer than Ranboo's been with most people he knows, but it wasn't ever going to be like that. A cariad loved you unconditionally, and while Ranboo knows how he feels about Tubbo- *most amazing person you've ever known light of the universe in his smile love him* -it's not reciprocated, which is *fine*, he gets it.

Ranboo is kind of a terrible person, and he's working on it, but that doesn't change what he's done, how he still acts sometimes, and Tubbo can insist all he wants that *'your past mistakes don't define you'*, but is it really a mistake if he knew what he was doing was wrong, and did it anyway?

He always knew what he'd do wasn't right, that it was hurting people, and he did it regardless because it made *him* feel less out of control, like he was strong and powerful for once. There was no way to get around it. You can't just forgive a decade of mistreatment and casual cruelty, but Tubbo sure as hell tried, would goof off and joke around and talk with Ranboo like he was worthy of it.

And some days, Ranboo can almost believe him, feels like the clouds have finally parted and he can see the dark blue of the skies overhead, feet confidently on the earth and not going anywhere, but then, there's the other days, where he can't get his head out of the dark abyss,

where it feels like he's constantly teleporting and is being crushed out of existence, thinks he's going to slip over the edge any second.

On those days, even though he does his best to be normal, Tubbo can always tell, will slide their hands together or wrap an arm around him, and Ranboo tries not to, but he can't ever stop himself from reaching back, from curling closer, desperate to try and stay grounded.

It's not always like that though, there's been a lot of good days, a lot of bright, glowing memories he cards through fondly, never more appreciative of his flawless recall than when he's reliving sliding down sandy dunes on a rusted out scrap piece, Tubbo's antenna thwapping into his face as the air rushes past, or that one mission they had to have disguises for, when Tubbo's fake mustache kept falling off while he talked, or just any of the little quiet moments in the Eshachi, engines rumbling under him and space streaking past, Tubbo singing softly to music trickling out of the speakers.

And it's days like that, that Ranboo's terrified of losing, hasn't bothered confessing because he knows what Tubbo's answer would be, *I care about you but not enough to love you*, and *that's fine*, it makes sense, and he's not going to jeopardize what he has for some stupid, hopeless wish.

They're friends, *partners*, and Tubbo cares enough as is, watches his back and makes sure he's safe, talks to him so he doesn't have to talk to the specters in his head anymore, keeps him from slipping off the side, and it's more than Ranboo ever thought he was going to get.

He's grateful for it, really he is, but sometimes, at night, when he's in his bunk and can't sleep, can hear the soft sounds of Tubbo breathing in his across the way, Ranboo will pull up those two nights on Tjhia-Yuet, when it felt like he had a star cradled in his arms and everything stopped being so loud and horrible in his head for once.

Ranboo knows he's got to knock it off, that it probably violates all kinds of boundaries between him and Tubbo, but he's weak, can't force himself to give up the memory of what he thinks it would feel like to be loved.

"Well if you're okay, think you could take over for a sec? I need a shower, like, *yesterday*." Tubbo says around a grin, antenna bobbing as he dips his head in a laugh, and he's so lovely, eyes crinkling in amusement, dimples appearing in his cheeks, *love you love you so much sunshine-*

And with a somber hand, Ranboo shoves all of it, all of the thoughts and feelings threatening to slip out like the colorful swirl of nebula between his fingers, into an empty room, thuds that door closed behind him and imagines locking it up, hurls the key as far as he can and hopes it stays gone this time.

"Yeah, no problem." He says with a smile of his own, slackening his hold around Tubbo's hands so he can get up, and it's okay, Ranboo's okay, but then Tubbo has to trail a hand lingeringly over his shoulder as he's going, and Ranboo shudders, feels that key slip back into his hands.

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## **Lesson One: Emotional connections are a weakness you can't afford**

“Mama? W-What’s an- an...uh, a-an nontioanal- e-emonaimal- e-e-nomi-” He gets frustrated when the word won’t come out like it’s supposed to, tail lashing behind him in irritation as he crosses his arms, uncoils at the light touch on his back, “It’s okay, darling, you can do it...just take your time.”

Ranboo sucks in a big breath, *he can do this*, pictures the way the word is written and works through it piece by piece, slowly putting it together, “E-Emo-tion-a-al, e...emotion-al-*emotional!*”

“Very good.” Mama praises quietly, her hand trailing feather light up to ruffle his hair, and he tips his head into her hand hard, trills hearing her breathy chuckle, “Now what was your question, darling?”

“W-What’s an um, *e-emotional connection?*” Ranboo asks with only a slight hesitance, looks over his shoulder at where mama’s resting, dark hair fanned out over pillows, shine of golden beads and rings decorating the braid she wears on her left.

“It’s a feeling people share between one another, and it...it can come in many forms, but it’s usually a strong one.” She explains patiently, and he tips his head to the side, a little confused, bites his lip not sure whether or not he can ask another question, but mama smiles and taps him lightly on the head, “Yes?”

“I-Is...is i-it a um, a-a bad t-t-thing?” Ranboo winces, ducking his head because that came out really broken and uneven, and he worries she’s going to be upset with him because- um b-because- *speak clearly it’s not that difficult why can’t you listen-*

“Hmm, sometimes...when it brings you closer with someone, you become...become more afraid of losing them.” Mama says softly, arm starting to shake as it slides off his head, and Ranboo wiggles closer so she doesn’t have to reach as far, and her eyes crinkle, “And having that feeling...can be...very scary.”

“Do we have an e-emoni- an *emotional* connection?” Ranboo asks, hands fiddling with each other in his lap, knows what Meleeri told him this morning during lessons, but being closer with his mama sounds nice, and as long as she’s there, he doesn’t think anything *could* be scary.

“Yes...” She whispers, eyelids fluttering like they do when she’s sleepy and can’t keep them open anymore, and Ranboo hopes she gets some good sleep soon, because it’s been happening more and more lately so she must be very tired.

“A-And is it...d-does it m-make you feel s-scared?” Ranboo looks back down at his hands, fingers all knotted together, tips of his claws poking dangerously at his skin, snaps his head up when there’s a light tug on his arm, strange expression on mama’s face.

“Come here, Ranboo.” She coaxes, and he scrabbles up the bed, burrows into her side and minds his horns, trills as she runs fingers through his hair. Mama starts to hum, the vibrations of it rattling around in her chest and Ranboo tucks his head closer, giggles a little at the

ticklish sensation while he absentmindedly plays with her braid, the one she wears for father, runs his claws over the golden bead capping the end.

“Mama?” He murmurs, on the edge of sleep himself, small hand enveloping the end of her braid, “Do I have an...an emot-emoti- *s-something like t-that* with my cariad?”

“You...you will...” She whispers quiet on an exhale, chest rising shallowly under his head, and Ranboo moves back a little, so it’s easier for her to breathe, “You will...when you...when you find them.”

“How do I do that? How do I know?” Ranboo can’t help asking even though he knows he should probably let her sleep now, but no one else will ever answer his questions, and mama hums lightly, hand dropping off his head limply, “You just will.”

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It’s always surreal, seeing his name spelled out on the sign next to their door, right beneath Tubbo’s, a physical marker to show that this is real, he *lives* here now, and it’s such a shock that Ranboo always has to blink a few times to make sure he’s seeing things right. Tubbo flaps his ID around at the touchpad until it finally lights up, letting him trip into the dark space of their room with a series of long, whiny noises, throwing his duffel at the foot of his bunk before collapsing face down into nicely made covers.

Ranboo sets his own bag down on a pile of crap threatening to swallow his side of the room, flops over on his unmade bunk, wincing as he stretches, twists to the side and cracks all of his vertebrae in one go, a long series of pops that snap in the silence like muffled blaster fire.

“E’even ou’of ten, a crackly guy...” Tubbo mumbles where his face is smashed into a pillow, right leg hanging awkwardly off the side of his bunk, boots still on, sounding like he’s half asleep already, and Ranboo gets to his feet with a roll of his eyes.

Crouching beside Tubbo’s bunk, he makes short work of undoing his laces and tugging his combat boots off, sets them by his bunkside in a neat line like he likes, hauls his dangling leg up to a chorus of incoherent grumblings and slings it onto the mattress properly. Tubbo wiggles into a more comfortable position, snuffling as he slings arms around a spare pillow, dragging it closer, and Ranboo can’t help the smile that unfurls across his lips, stands up quickly to avoid doing anything stupid.

His joints protest in a series of ugly sounding creaks, back pains making themselves known and very irritated, pissed off from where he was slammed into the Eshachi earlier. The muscles could probably stand to have some of the kinks worked out of them, and it’s not like Ranboo’s going to sleep anyway, so he pats his pockets down making sure he has his handheld and ID before going to leave their room.

“M’where ya goin’?” Tubbo slurs behind him, and Ranboo peeks over his shoulder, smiling softly at the squinty eyed, scandalous look he’s being given, motions at Tubbo to lay back down, “I’ll be back later, don’t worry. Go ahead and get some sleep.”

“You ge’some.” Tubbo huffs petulantly but obligingly thuds his head back into his pillow, and from the sound of his breathing, is out within seconds. Ranboo makes sure to slip as quietly as possible out into the hallway, doesn’t want to wake him now that he’s finally asleep, door closing behind him with a gentle hiss.

It’s like this after every mission, Tubbo crashing as soon as they get back to HQ, one of the only places he feels safe enough to actually sleep instead of just dozing, and this last mission had been *long*. Ranboo does some quick mental math while he’s walking down the hall, tail lashing in concern when he gets his answer, double checks but nope, he was right the first time.

They haven’t been back to HQ in around eighty imperial hours, meaning Tubbo hasn’t really slept in *over three days*, which is completely unacceptable and explains why he was nodding off earlier as they were landing in the hangar. Ranboo clicks his teeth and feels his ears flick back, wonders if there’s anything he can do to help Tubbo sleep better while they’re out on missions, because it’s not healthy for him to get so little rest.

*Hypocrite*, whispers warm in his ears unexpectedly and Ranboo waves him off with a grimace, shoulders slumping a little with guilt even though there’s nothing he can do about it. It’s not like he *forces* himself to stay awake, sleep just...won’t ever come to him, hasn’t in a really, *really* long time, to the point that yeah, Ranboo’s kind of always perpetually exhausted, but he’s gotten used to it.

It’s really easy to ignore after a while and doesn’t affect him that much if he’s being honest, mind still fast and sharp like it needs to be. Besides, Ranboo’ll pass out eventually, maybe in another few hours, when it looks like the walls are melting and he can’t feel his hands, but he’s still a good ways off from being there, can walk straight without too much effort.

According to his internal clock, it’s a little after seven in the night cycle local time, hopefully meaning the gym will be mostly empty, everyone else going to get dinner or winding down for the evening, and Ranboo looks forward to having the place to himself.

By now, he’s met most of the other Syndicate members, all ninety four of them, keeps a running log book on their interests and general descriptions that he updates anytime he learns something new, wants to be as personable as possible, and for the most part, they’re all nice-  
*ha, that’s what you think wonder what they say behind your back-*

*Shut up, yes they are stop overanalyzing*

Doesn’t matter who it is, but talking to anyone that’s not Tubbo has become the most draining thing Ranboo’s ever done, mind constantly latching on to seemingly innocuous phrases and trying to dissect them, find what they really mean, and if it’s an insult, how best to counter it, if it’s a threat, how to get around it safely, or if it’s something useful, *how best to exploit it*.

He doesn’t *want* to be like this anymore, but he can’t seem to make it stop, and it’s exhausting, always having to check over your shoulder for the knife waiting an inch above your ribs in the gloom. It never used to hit him this hard, the constant anxieties, but back then, Ranboo didn’t really have anything else to compare to, thought that was how life was.



The deceit and the lying and the paranoia come to him as easy as breathing, almost seems like Ranboo *needs* them on some level, but it shouldn't *be like that* anymore. He's learned, he's gotten out, *he should be moving on*, not- feeling like he's constantly sliding back into old habits, making the same horrible choices over and over and *over* again.

It's one of the reasons he keeps to himself a lot at HQ, petrified over what he could do to the people here, and none of them deserve the monstrosities he's capable of, they're all very good and kind and welcoming.

And Ranboo's the snake that's somehow slithered into their family home.

He's really trying to be better, fights down his instincts to pick people's brains apart and find out what makes them crumble, works on being more considerate and thoughtful, and he sees a perfect opportunity to do that crossing the central hub on his way to the gym.

The mail center is still open, line free for once, and Ranboo's mind nudges a memory in his direction, Tubbo offhandedly saying his mother sends him care packages from time to time but he always forgets to check for them, and he's heading over without another conscious thought.

No one's behind the counter when he walks up, giving Ranboo a good view of the racks and racks of bins for sorting any physical mail the Syndicate receives, most of it small packages or tubes of some kind, made out of a host of materials that even he's struggling to name all of.

Ranboo lightly taps the little bell on the counter, waits with his hands tucked behind him and a neutral, friendly expression on his face as he hears someone shuffling around in the back, feels that look melt off instantly when the clerk rounds the corner, resignation settling in like a lead blanket because *of course*, Ancient's he has just- *the worst luck-*

"Heyooo! Ran-boogie my, *man!* What's crackalackin'? How'ya been?"

"Hello, Ozzi." Ranboo sighs, wonders if it's too late to cut and run as Ozzi leans an arm on the counter, long, narrowed line of their skull constantly frozen in a grin, shadows curling out of the cracks and crevices, orange eyes glowing ominously in the sockets, "Not gonna ask me how I've been? That's fine, I get it, you don't *need* to ask because you can feel it, can't you? Through the logic defying bond of *passionate* friendship and love we share, a love, only felt by-

"I-I am here for mail Ozzi! Because this is the um, t-the m-mail center, a-and and you- I-" Ranboo stammers, always unbalanced whenever Ozzi starts in on their *nonsense*, shoulders drawing back indignantly at the echoing laughter that tumbles out of Ozzi's flapping maw, eyes vanishing for a minute while they cackle.

The sound of it triggers that terrible, freezing, screaming anger in him, and Ranboo feels every door in his head slam shut, walling him off from everything so he feels *nothing* when he flings a finger at Ozzi, demanding archly, "Go find Tubbo's mail this *instant*, you *sniveling cadaver!*"

And as soon as the words are out of his mouth, he realizes what he said, *how* he said it, and half of those doors crash back open, dark yawning chasms that let *things* free, scuttling across the floor with skeletal hands and eyes rattling around in sunken faces, *horrible nasty terrible thing there's nothing good in you never was never will be you're ours never getting out never getting away go take that-*

But Ozzi laughs, a high, yipping sound that jostles Ranboo out of his head, leaving him to boggle at Ozzi where their shoulders are jumping in mirth, making the dark shapes that form their ears and mane waiver, dispersing like dissolving smoke before condensing back.

“Hey! It’s *Serrah* Sniveling Cadaver to you! Departed Ones, don’t act like we’re *familiar* or anything. *Ew.*” Ozzi says around that eternal wide grin, tosses their head to the side as they move back through the racks, “Tubbo, you said? How’s the little oscar? Hopefully full’o less holes this time ‘round.”

“Yes he is doing well, thank you.” Ranboo’s brain spits out on autopilot, thankfully can function without much input because the rest of it is reeling, trying to dissect what just happened and find the *logic in it there has to be a reason for their response no hostility or double meaning in their voice and you know what that sounds like they laughed it was genuine what’s wrong with them are you going insane-*

*Can’t get where you already are, poor psychotic little brother,* simpers behind him and Ranboo’s tail lashes, teeth grinding together painfully as he forces himself still, can’t let her see she’s getting to him, can’t let her know what he’s thinking or feeling or- wait...w-wait, s-she’s not real, *she’s not here calm down get it together-*

“That’s what we like to heeeaaar!” Ozzi sings from a few rows over, shuffling sounds halting for a second before picking back up, “Well...Tubbo’s got nothin’, want me to check yours?”

“Sure.” Ranboo answers without thinking, *why bother getting them to look who would ever send you anything,* heart loud in his ears and thundering like a thing possessed, *your entire life is here now you never had one to begin with a phantom of a person pretending like you exist-*

N-No- No! *No, he exists.* He’s real and he’s alive and he’s here, talking to stupid Ozzisosteon of Osseus who probably has more screws loose than *him*, and for some reason, it’s a comforting thought, has Ranboo untensing slowly.

*It’s okay you’re real you’re fine you’re here,* Ranboo reminds himself, taking a deep breath that comes in smoother than he thought it would. He’s still a little shaky though, and flexes his stiff fingers together and apart, remembers Tubbo helping him do it the first time around, dark eyes insistent and firm, voice low and affectionate as he kept repeating, *breathe in one two, out one two.*

So he does, follows along to the memory, breathing in time with his past self, and his heartrate does start to even out, but Ranboo can’t tell if it’s from the breathing exercise or thinking about Tubbo’s fire bright fingers curling through his own. Either way doesn’t matter, because it helps him get control over his spinning mind, setting it right with a firm jerk of his

hand, and everything evens out and he's standing alone again in a hallway full of doors, the ones that *need* to be shut, shut, but some others open, spilling out watery light.

*It's okay you're fine it's alright you made a mistake but that's okay*, Ranboo sucks in air through his teeth as he sees Ozzi loping back up to the counter, claws biting into his palms briefly before he remembers to move his hand to the bracelet around his left wrist, sinking them in there instead, *it's okay they didn't seem mad just apologize can't do what you did there here have to be better have to be something more*.

"Aaaaannnnnd we have a winner winner, unfiltered nightmares dinner!" Ozzi crows, spinning an ashy colored envelope around in their void fingers, holds it out to Ranboo with a grand flourish, skull cocking to the side like a broken door hinge when Ranboo doesn't immediately reach for it, "Did you forget how fingers work? That's okay, I know how. So you first have to make'em bend, which, if they won't do that, that's problem one and-"

"I-I'm sorry- f-f-for snapping at y-you. I-It was uncalled for and I-I regret it." Ranboo says as evenly as he can, claws working into the bracelet harder at how his voice still stutters anyway, *speak clearly you idiot it's not that difficult why-* but it gets overridden by the memory of a warm forehead against his, ticklish sensation dragging over his horns, *it's okay understand you just fine take your time you'll get it breathe-*

And he does, fingers finally relaxing and slipping free from the abused cording, watches in trepidation as Ozzi's skull rotates back up to a proper position slowly, *you fucked up ruined everything doing the same thing making the same mistakes*, but then they say, "Hey, no problems, guy. I know you don't like, *actually* mean it, you're a good dude. Also, it's really funny when you get all huffy, kinda like an indignant goose."

*They're...insane they are actually insane*, Ranboo thinks in disbelief, panic and fear crawling up the back of his throat, but Ozzi just fans their shadow hands out, their sign for an intentional smile, winking orange eyes glowing a little brighter, and Ranboo feels himself hesitantly smiling back. I-It's fine if they're both crazy, right? Would mean that it's okay for Ranboo to be a little less than normal here, wouldn't have to worry so much about frantically trying to keep all his mismatched parts together.

Ozzi gets on his nerves, but in a way he finds he enjoys, exasperation that's always hinted on the edges of being fond, grimaces that are honestly closer to grins, something easy about the way they snip at each other. It's a strange feeling to have, nothing like the warm care and admiration he feels for Tubbo, reminds Ranboo of something sharper, aggravating but still nice?

He honestly has no idea what to call it, figures his busted mind is churning out the wrong things again, b-but that's okay here, he reminds himself, because Ozzi's head isn't screwed on right either, literally isn't some days, and that's okay, they're okay.

Which is why Ranboo's so worried about having offended them, still not entirely convinced that he hasn't, but isn't going to push it because that's rude...and so is waving a letter in someone's face like Ozzi is doing right now, Ranboo snatching it from them with a quick swipe of his claws.

“See? *Hilarious*. Peak humor.” Ozzi declares loftily, going back to lounging against the counter as they wave a boney shadow hand around, rambling on about- *something inane*, and Ranboo pretends to ignore them as he squints at the ash grey envelope, tail curling behind him in curiosity.

There’s no return address, only thing on the front his address at HQ written in standard, done by a hand Ranboo doesn’t recognize, and he flips it over confused as Ozzi keeps monologuing, “-and anyway, ya’know...you should come by more often Ran, we have a good time in the ol’Ozzisosteon Ozzporium, which- that’s what I’m *trying* to get Techno to let me rename the mail center to, but he said it was a mouthful. *A mouthful?* How could it-”

Everything cuts out very abruptly, entire world narrowing down to the inky black seal holding the envelope closed, *two headed dragon Daysetter crown and winged staff*, and Ranboo’s claws punch straight through the paper with no hesitation, ringing in his ears and pressure compounding in his chest, nothing left but-

*Towering ceilings and wash of teal light gold winking in the gloom like eyes that track your every move whispers coiling through the dark and hissing cruelly just loud enough for you to overhear upturned chins and the backs of heads of shoulders never look at you why do they never look at you know your place in line only step forward when called derision in his gaze as he looks at you finally aching looks at you but which one are you again-*

Ranboo staggers back with nothing in his eyes but long dark hallways and empty nights, body shaking around him, swears he sees a looming figure out of the corner of his left eye, towering up to the ceiling, *pathetic an absolute disgrace sent into hysterics over one letter disservice to your family is that why you left, did you think you could escape?*

Jerking his head to the side, Ranboo tries to stop *seeing him*, but he just moves along, always one step ahead always there, looking down on him and judging him, lips pulled back in a sneer bearing sharp fangs, monotone voice booming out like the crash of asteroids into the earth, *you can’t escape yourself you take failure with you everywhere, how long until that partner of yours realizes it? How long until he understands you’re nothing?*

And reality *roils*, sent spinning end over end with how his vision whites out in all consuming *anger*, throat constricting like he’s being choked, frozen dead hands strangling the life out of him until all that’s left is the frigid burn of where each digit presses stiffly into his esophagus and it’s-

*Cord wrapped tight around your throat press of a knife next gonna sing for us screaming as it trails in agonizing lines down the side of your neck, across your shoulders, threatening at the tips of your fingers after you took a swipe at one of them behave or you’ll lose these next birdie-*

He hunches over, claws digging into his head, pulse drumming so loud his vision shakes with it, pulsating from the warm grey of HQ’s floor to cracked concrete darkened with his own blood to smooth shiny tiles that reflect back his face, betray everything he’s ever felt, weeping lines of color pouring down out of his eyes and spilling thick across the ground, red and green, *not normal never been normal what’s wrong with you-*

*You know what's wrong your head's on sideways it's never been right, her voice drips with condescension and gold, stunning bright light of her crown stretching his shadow out long in front of him, and it feels like there's a hand wrapped crushingly around his shoulder, forcing him to kneel, poor insane little brother, don't worry, once I have the throne, you'll go where you belong-*

*N-No! NO! You can't- YOU CAN'T-* He screams but cuts himself short when he hears that crop slap into a palm, never hit him never touched him, *but it was always there the threat,* and he can see the toes of her boots right in front of him, long sweep of her dress, authority puddling onto the floor, voice as demanding and unrelenting as her spine, *mind your tongue know how to behave I taught you better than that, do you think anyone's impressed by you? Do you think your mother would be proud of the man you've become?*

It's clear what the answer is, *it's clear what the answer is,* and he tries to swallow tries to breathe has to *get away from them,* but he's hemmed in on all sides, the three of them crowding closer and caging him in, he can't get away, *he can't get away,* curls up as small as he can get hoping they'll leave him alone, but they *don't,* all of their voices mingling into one horrific distorted echo-

*Absolutely nothing a waste of space a waste of time regret and shame and a mistake should've never been born should've never lived shouldn't have teleported back up-*

Ranboo howls soundlessly, a terrible, burning sensation that runs his throat ragged and sears in his eyes, claws digging in to the point of breaking skin but *he doesn't care,* frantically thinks that if maybe he goes deep enough, he can get *them out of him,* get rid of what they did to him so he can stop *feeling like this all the time.*

He hates it, he hates it so much it's tearing him apart and he doesn't know what to do with the violence he's found burning in his heart, kept at a low flame for years but now it's come roaring to life, seeing everything that exists outside of those mirror black walls and he's going insane, *he is insane,* he can't do this anymore, he has to- *alien weight of a blaster in your hands but it's growing comfortable like the blood on your face is growing cold lunatic satisfaction at knowing that shit head is dead that he died by your hand and you've got to have to you need to-*

And Ranboo doesn't know when he moved, maybe teleported at some point, but the next thing he's aware of is staggering through the doors to the gym, somehow knew where to go, how to find him, and that's the last coherent thought he has as he rounds a corner and sees two figures sparring.

His head is absolutely empty at this point, a screaming, white hot mass of anger and violence and mania that doesn't know anything else, *he doesn't know anything,* and at whatever look must be on his face, Dream uncoils out of the stance he'd just dropped into, jerks his head towards the locker room and says a little out of breath, "Go wrap your hands."

Tape going around knuckles in a pattern he's learned to do in his sleep, kept it so his fingers can still bend, capping his claws so they can't draw blood, secured under his corded bracelet and Ranboo's stumbling out the locker room door, waits until Dream takes a familiar pose and then he's gone, streaking across the room with a feral scream tearing out of his mouth.

He cocks a fist back, gets grabbed under the arm and is hurled through the air, hits the ground painfully but rolls to his feet, pushing off hard, muscles bunching and launching him back at Dream, who steps out of the way of his next swing, tries to sweep his legs out from under him, but Ranboo's pivoting, drives a fist into Dream's gut as he spins past.

Dream moves with the punch and wraps two bone white hands around his arm, trying to flip him again, but Ranboo shrieks like something unholy, driving a knee up without any thought of being careful, smashing it into the underside of Dream's head and snaps it back with a sharp yelp. It sends something dark and viscously proud streaking through him, and he advances like a madman, swinging fists and ducking under reaching hands, the entire time howling incomprehensibly, fury fueling his every movement.

*Get away get away get away gET AWAY GET AWAY*, Ranboo feels himself get grabbed on the shoulder, gym twirling around him as he's flipped, *stop stop stop STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT*, smashes into the ground and gets the breath knocked out of him, screaming in every gasped inhale, *STOP MAKING ME FEEL LIKE THAT I HATE YOU I HATE ALL OF YOU*, pushes himself up on shaking arms and goes back in for more, agonizing heat bleeding out of his chest, *HATE YOU HATE YOU HATEYOUHATEYOUHATE-*

His next punch lands, vibrations racing up his arms and blending into the frantic tempo of his heart, a rushing crescendo of thundering beats that crashes harsh in his ears like the march of war drums, aching, painful memories steaming past like a runaway freight train.

*Standing in line with everyone else someone's foot kicking into the back of your leg as you bow to father making you stumble and he gets that LOOK on his face better though than that one time he stared you directly in the eyes which one are you again he asks-*

-Ranboo screams, driving forwards with *years* of pent up frustrations and anger bubbling to the surface that he can't get rid of fast enough, it's going to kill him unless he *can get rid of it*, wants it out wants it gone, *he hates them he hates them hE HATES THEM HE HATES ALL OF THEM-*

*-picture perfect posture and a voice you've hammered until it stops trembling but still she tuts her tongue and looks at you down the length of her nose, fingers rapping into the left side of your face under the eye you'd gouge out if you could how unfortunate she says-*

-arms trembling with the force of punches, of trying to hit harder, *to make someone else hurt for once*, teeth cracking together every time he hits the floor, rattling his head around but it never knocks loose what it's supposed to, never seems to *fix anything what's wRONG WITH HIM WHY IS HE LIKE THIS-*

*-a bead you've guarded with your life and narrow green eyes boring into you, sharp nails picking you apart from the beginning, older better smarter, always ahead of you, never gave you a chance to breathe or recover, hand pushing you closer and closer to the edge go ahead and take that long walk off a short drop she sneers-*

-howling senselessly, he hits Dream head on, flailing at him like a wild animal and goes unwillingly to the ground, hands scrabbling uselessly as he's pinned, heart splintering into a

hundred pieces because why didn't they care about him, what'd he do wrong, *why did they hurt him why why wHY*, he *tried so hard* to be what they wanted and it was never enough.

He's *never* good enough, not for his father, not for his governess, not for the heiress, not for his cari- and the seething, screaming noises clawing out of his mouth warp with the clicking that starts up in the back of his throat, morphing into desperate wails as he breaks down crying into the training mat.

The pressure on his back eases up instantly, but still, Ranboo doesn't rise, hangs his head and lets his hair shroud his face, hiding how it contorts in ugly sobs, last of that unholy fire snuffing out, leaving him cold and alone and suddenly aware of how much everything *hurts*.

Pain throbs in time to his hitching breaths, radiating out from his shoulders, stinging in his knuckles and aching in his wrists, deep seated pressure in his chest that refuses to let up, spine twisted at a weird angle and protesting vehemently, none of the kinks worked out of it, only made worse, and that's all Ranboo's good at isn't it, *ruining everything*.

He sobs pathetically, so very tired, and it's not from sleep deprivation. This goes deeper than that, settled into his bones like a plague, threaded through his muscles and nerves like a cancerous growth, fatigue at being *alive*, at having to get up every day and go through this shit again and again and *again*.

How is Ranboo supposed to keep doing this, *he can't keep doing this it's killing him*, what's the point in trying to fix something that's so irrevocably broken? Might as well just toss it out and get a better one, a new one, just- anything that's less of mess, cracks running so deep in its foundations, there's not ever going to be a way to patch it, always going to have to watch your footing, always going to be a disaster.

Maybe he should just go take that wa- *fire bright fingers on his face smile like starshine you promised me Boo promised you'd stay* -and he sighs in resignation.

*You shouldn't have gone back on Imuna you still had time then*, Ranboo thinks in despair, staring unseeing at the desaturated blue of the mat, *he still hated you then didn't care wouldn't have been hurt if you'd never come back*, closes his eyes with a stuttering exhale, *but now you've tricked him into caring about you and if you leave it's going to hurt him can't do that again promised you'd never do that again*.

Something nudges into his shoulder and Ranboo snaps his head up, still panting a little ragged as he stares uncomprehendingly at the bottle being shaken in his direction, flicks his gaze up to where Dream's vapid smile is tipped towards him.

"Here, you need to get some fluids in you." Dream urges in a quiet voice, and with a shaking hand, Ranboo reaches up and takes it, twisting the lid off with a crack. He gingerly touches his tongue to the first drops of moisture, always wary over what he's been given, but it doesn't burn so Ranboo starts sucking down greedy mouthfuls.

There's a slight shuffling sound and Ranboo looks over at where Dream is settling down next to him, legs crossed with his arms draped over them, waiting patiently until Ranboo's done drinking and then orders kindly, "Alright, cool down stretches. Chop chop."

It's quiet while they go through their routine, Ranboo not really aware of what he's doing, head lost in static as his body goes through the motions on its own, working out aches and stiffness that've been there for longer than today. Sometimes, Dream will correct him with a light hand, readjusting his posture or adding a little more pressure so something will pop like it's supposed to, but it's always very brief, like he knows not to overstay his welcome.

And it's because he does, actually, knows what it's like to sit there and not be in control of anything, forced into a box by commanding hands and unwavering eyes, casual cruelty that gets overlooked day in and day out by the wider galaxy. Ranboo knows what happens to shifters, *everyone* does, but no one ever does anything about it, lets them get scooped up as children and indoctrinated into shadow organizations, breeding the perfect soldiers, the perfect assassins.

Watching Dream out of the corner of his eye, how languorously he stretches, confidence in his movements and easy laughter usually floating around, comfortable aura he radiates like a crackling fire, most wouldn't guess that *he's* been through that, would assume he was one of the lucky ones that were spared, but he wasn't and Ranboo *can see it*.

It's in the way he doesn't like having people stand behind him or hover over his shoulder, how he always keeps a weapon close on hand, even here, someplace that's supposed to be safe, never shows his real face to anyone outside of these walls, that little twitch his fingers get when someone shouts his name, easily masked by an exuberant reply and wave.

It's how he never asked any questions the first time he found Ranboo in the gym, claws embedded in a sandbag, sunk in to the point of bleeding with that terrible shake in his shoulders, just helped him get free, showed him how to wrap his hands, bone white fingers darting across his night dark skin like the flash of shooting stars.

*Here, over under, around the knuckles, still want them to bend*, he said in that low voice, nothing in it save for melancholic recognition, working fast and diligently, lead Ranboo back out to the training area and dropped into a ready stance, waited for him patiently, never ever took a swing at him, always let Ranboo make the first move, *understanding* in every line of his body.

He doesn't know exactly what Dream went through, but for him to see Ranboo, unhinged and on the edge of violent self-implosion, to react as calmly as he did, means that his mind's got to be fractured apart just as bad, great, yawning chasms that lead down into his own nightmares. You'd never know it from looking at him, how he laughs and messes around with Sapnap, kind way he mentors new members, how he is with George, tender and sweet and caring, like he's never had a hand or words raised against him.

Like he's normal.

"H-How...how do you d-do it?" Ranboo pants, staring blankly across the room to the racks along the walls, weights and rubber melee weapons, other pieces of equipment stacked up nice and neat, exact opposite to the cluttered nightmare that is his maze of hallways, "How do you p-pretend to be normal?"



“I’m not pretending.” Dream says immediately, and Ranboo’s claws flex spastically, thought they were the same, but if he’s not pretending, went through everything that he did and still came out fine, what the fuck is wrong with Ranboo, *what the fuck is he supposed to do*, but then Dream continues, “The hell does *normal* mean anyway? There is no *normal*, it doesn’t exist. Everyone is different, and as long as it works for you, who cares if it doesn’t work for anyone else?”

“That’s not what I meant...y-you got out okay and I-I’m just- I...” Ranboo murmurs quietly, hiding behind his hair where it brushes past his jaw now, longer than it’s ever been, hears Dream sigh, “Ranboo, you can’t measure yourself against me. I’ve been out longer, *I’ve* had more time to adjust, please remember that. You’ll get better, it just...takes *time*.”

Time? What the hell does that mean, how *much* time is he supposed to need?

Because it’s been two months now and Ranboo doesn’t feel like he’s getting better.

It just feels like he’s getting worse.

Anger he’s not used to consumes his body and burns his fingers, growing stronger and more painful by the day, seems like he’s losing what control he had over his mind in the first place. The specters find him constantly now, even though Ranboo doesn’t call for them anymore, and he’s really starting to get scared with how real it’s been feeling, terrified his sister was always right, that he really is crazy.

“Does Tubbo know?” Dream asks whisper-quiet and Ranboo cringes, thinks he’s referring to the specters at first, but that’s impossible, *Ranboo’s never told anyone about them*. He then realizes Dream means about *this*, *the anger the violence*, how he has to come get the sense knocked into him or explode, and his ears flick back to press close to his skull as he mumbles, “H-He knows *enough*.”

“But...not everything?”

*Of course not*, Ranboo almost spits out hysterical, can see in his mind all the dark winding corridors lined with doors, feels helpless just thinking about trying to explain any of it, how to articulate to someone else the busted way he thinks, how he’s haunted by voices of his own creation, something that started as a way to stave off loneliness but has since grown into their own entities.

He can’t put that on *Tubbo*, the person he loves more wholly than he’s ever cared about anyone else, imagines dragging out all the skeletal corpses that live in his head and throwing them at Tubbo’s feet, making him listen to every horrible thing that goes on behind his eyes and knows he’d be horrified, sick with guilt and worry and *pity*.

Ranboo feels his lips curl, hating the thought of Tubbo looking at him like he’s some broken misfit thing, and *he is*, but he couldn’t stand to see it reflected back in those night dark eyes, the ones that mistakenly look at him like he’s worth something. There aren’t many things Ranboo will fight fang and claw for, but that’s one of them, the way Tubbo will stop and smile at him in awe sometimes when he’s pulled off a tricky shot or recited something he read years ago, how his eyes crinkle and shine with admiration.

No one's ever looked at him like that, and Ranboo is determined to never lose it, has been keeping his skeletons chained away and tries to make sure it's not obvious that he's having conversations only he can hear, hopes Tubbo never catches on to what an actual disaster he is.

He'd lose him then, he'd lose him so fast, because when Tubbo asked him to be his partner, to go with him, he didn't realize everything Ranboo was bringing along, the wraiths that live in his head and the ones that loom over his shoulders, *the insanity and the destructive tendencies*, constant need to self implode or hurt others, every horrible keepsake he's received from his terrible family.

When he still hasn't answered Dream, the shifter sighs, voice coming out a little firmer this time as he says, "Do you want to know how I got better?"

And Ranboo whips to look at him, desperate hope burning in his chest because he'd do *anything* to go back to feeling normal, afraid for a second because he's not sure he's ever felt like that, but he can get there, *he can do this*, and then Dream tips his head to the side, "You're not going to like it...but I *talked* to people, about all of it. Sap first...then George, didn't hold anything back, I *told them everything*."

*Everything all of it the halls the doors the skeletal remains and voices how you dropped over the parapets one day still think about doing it about not teleporting back up*, and Ranboo swallows harshly, claws crinkling into his bottle as Dream continues, "I'm not gonna lie, it was hard, it was *really* hard, but...it helped, getting it out of me...knowing I didn't have to suffer it alone."

"W-What am I supposed to *tell him*?" Ranboo demands in a strangled voice, tips of his claws slipping through the plastic like its tissues paper, *like the delicate skin over his wrists*, and Dream's face doesn't emote when he's like this, but it seems to get a gentler cast to it as he says, "The truth."

And Ranboo almost laughs in hysteria.

Words never came easy to him, they were always tripping and stumbling and it was so *hard* to make them mean what he *meant*, but he *learned* how to be good at them, to twist them and warp them until he got what he wanted, *until he was safe*, altered them to the point that whatever they actually meant was unrecognizable.

And that's the problem, Ranboo doesn't think he knows *how* to say things that are true anymore, can only obfuscate and speak in lies, throwing up more and more walls and doors until he's buried in a labyrinth of his own creation, couldn't find the way out at this point even if he wanted to, and with sagging shoulders, he croaks in defeat, "I-I *can't*, Dream..."

It's a risk to admit, and he cringes, waiting for the backlash the, *you gave up already wow how pathetic you'd never be able to do it anyway absolute disgrace*, is surprised then, to hear some shuffling, an electric touch at his shoulder that zaps through every single layer of clothing, has him peeking through his hair at the white mass next to him.

“That’s okay.” Dream says softly, no expression on his face, but he doesn’t need it, not with how much comes through in his voice alone, brief flash of a memory, *gentle hand on your back and resting on your head depthless care in her eyes she always cared for you the most you can do it just take your time*, and Ranboo’s vision swims, “You’ll get there.”

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### **Lesson Fifty-Three: Never fully trust anyone**

“Greetings, Ranboo.”

His head snaps up, moving a little too fast, and he berates himself, knows it gives away that either he’s scared or interested, makes sure to hold himself extra still as Reshaa walks towards him, sweet smile on her face.

“Hello honored sister, how are you today?” Ranboo greets like he’s been taught, fist brought up to his chest as he bows low for her, slightly confused as to why she’s come to find him. As heiress, Reshaa is very busy, has much more important things to be doing than talking to *him*, but...he’s kind of excited, actually, doesn’t get to spend much time with his eldest sister.

When Reshaa gets closer, he can see out of the corner of his eye that she’s got something tucked in the sleeves of her dress, can’t stop the way his ears perk up, and she laughs light and airy, saying, “I have something for you, dear little brother. Here.”

She then draws out the most beautiful book he’s ever seen, shells inlaid in the turquoise cover and reflecting rainbows in the light, and he darts forward without thinking, doesn’t grab it, but looks up at her in honest excitement, “F-For me? R-Re- Really!”

“Of course.” Reshaa coos, holding it out for him and Ranboo plucks it from her hands quickly, fingers running over the slick cover and thumbing at the spine, flips it open only to frown a little seeing the looping script inside, “I-I can’t read it...”

“Aw, that’s alright, no one cares that you *still* haven’t managed to figure out cursive.” Reshaa tells him sympathetically, but it...sounds wrong, like she’s actually disappointed in him, and Ranboo starts to deflate, hunching into himself because he’s let her down, “It’s really not that tricky to learn...I’m sure you’ll get it one day.”

“Of course...” Ranboo murmurs quietly, clutching the book to his front, refuses to meet her eyes, but that looks ungrateful doesn’t it, and he knows how to behave, quickly straightens up and bows low for her, “I thank you very kindly for the present, honored sister.”

“Of course, dear brother. Run along now, enjoy your gift.” Reshaa tells him with a brilliant smile, and Ranboo smiles back, waves goodbye as he heads for his room, thinks it’s weird later, how Reshaa’s smiles never meet her eyes.

Ranboo settles onto the window bench once he gets back, snuggling down into the collection of pillows while he cracks the book open, and he may not be able to read it easily, but there’s gorgeous illustrations every other page. He trills softly running his fingers over them careful,

feeling the dip from where the pen pressed in and the crinkle of the gold foil, realizes this must be *handmade* and not a reproduction.

Closing the book gently, Ranboo hugs it to his chest in overwhelming affection, sniffs wetly thinking about how Reshaa specifically got this *for him*, spent her time and probably a good bit of money on it, *for him*, just for Ranboo, *she does care about me really and truly just like mama*, and he goes back to looking through it, this time, with an unconscious smile tugging his lips up.

It doesn't take long to get through all the pictures, and they're *wonderful*, but not the point of the book, whatever story it's hiding lost in looping swirls and curves. Ranboo struggles with cursive, has been putting off learning to read the tangled shapes because it makes him frustrated, irritated over not being able to pick out the words he knows, but he'd be doing a disservice to Reshaa that way, would be callous to her effort and clear care for him.

So with a heavy sigh but newfound determination, Ranboo scrambles out of his pile and takes a seat at his desk, flipping the book open to the first page and grabs his cursive workbook, slowly begins going through it line by line, piecing the story together as he goes. It's poetry of some sort, talking about things Ranboo's read of but never seen, vast spread of liquids that stretch to the horizon, animals that swim and live in it, breathing without need for air, and it's fascinating, has him completely enthralled.

He's so engrossed in his work, in the story unfolding in front of him, Ranboo misses the first knock at his door, jumps at the louder banging that follows, gets to his feet and darts into the center of the room, shakily calls out, "E-Enter!"

Before the door opens, Ranboo straightens his clothes quick, clicks his heels together and stands ramrod straight, thinks it's going to be Meleeri or someone coming to fetch him for dinner, isn't prepared for *father* to come through, and he dips his head so fast, "F-Father! I-um- I-I- it's good to see you, I hope you've been well and-"

But father walks past him, bright snap of his teal cape flashing in Ranboo's peripherals as he goes over to the desk, and he wants to turn around, to *ask*, but knows he's not allowed until he's been acknowledged. Ranboo tries to keep his breathing even, won't fidget or pick at things, *stand still behave show respect to your family*, but he can't stop the way the hair on his tail floofs out hearing the hard sigh that leaves father, the *displeasure* in his voice as he calls, "Search the rest of the room."

Ranboo blinks in confusion as several guards march in, keeps himself very still despite how fast his heart is going, watching them dig through his things, turning furniture over and running their hands along the undersides, *like he's a criminal like he's done something wrong like they're looking for something*, and he swallows hard, hesitantly asks, "F-Father? Is um, i-is everything alright?"

He doesn't respond, and the silence grates and digs at Ranboo until he can't take it anymore, turns around quickly in a panic to see father shuffling through the papers on his desk. There's not a single hint as to what he's thinking or feeling in his posture, neutrality draped over him like armor, but it's clear Ranboo's in trouble for *something*.

Sucking in a steadying breath, he creeps closer, thinks maybe father just didn't hear him, stands by his side and looks up at him, at the hard lines of his face and regal profile, *I'm good I behave I promise please look at me I'm here I care for you*, still isn't acknowledged, so with a shaking hand, he reaches out to tug at his cape, "Father, I'm sor--"

"Do you find amusement in acting out like you do?" The commanding tone of his voice freezes Ranboo where he is, and his fingers curl back into his palm quickly as father turns to regard him with one hard, green eye, "Is it *humorous* for you, to make the rest of his look bad? Do you enjoy it?"

"I-I-I-" Ranboo tries, tongue caught up on all the panic that's clogging his throat, keeping coherent thoughts from leaving his mouth, doesn't know what's *happening*, and father looks away with a disappointed sigh, and Ranboo wants to sink through the floor and never come back up.

"I don't know what I expected." Father says as he spins on his heel, striding past with *Ranboo's book* held in one hand on his way out the door, the one Reshaa gave to him, *his present*, and he *panics*, "N-No!"

Father halts in his tracks, and this is bad, *this is really bad*, heart going a mile a minute while Ranboo keens in the back of his throat, *please father no it's from Reshaa I'm sorry I'll be good but don't take it please please please*, can't find the words to articulate what he *needs to*, doesn't understand what's happening.

Ranboo waits shaking, fingers all knotted together and clutched to his front, waits for father to turn around and acknowledge him, but he doesn't, simply holds the book up and orders, "If I ever find out you resorted to petty theft again, from honored guests no less, you'll be sent to a reformatory school off planet. Do I make myself clear, Ranboo?"

*Reformatory theft off planet what's happening no you're wrong it's a present I would never I didn't no n-no please please don't send me away I just-* but Ranboo chokes it all back, knows that tone of voice, knows what he's supposed to say, haltingly clicks his heels together and brings a trembling hand up to his chest, head bowed as he whispers, "Yes sir."

"Good. You'll have dinner sent to your room the next few nights so you can reflect on your actions. See that it doesn't happen again." Father says, and then he's gone, sharp crack of his boots fading away as he leaves, the guards following after, last one out closing the door behind them with a deafening thud, and Ranboo collapses to his knees sobbing.

He claps his hands over his mouth, trying to muffle the noises he's making, knows anyone walking by his door would be able to hear. Ranboo has to calm down, works on taking deep breaths and scrunches up into as small a shape as possible, arms moving to wrap tight around himself, slips his eyes closed and pretends it's his mother's touch comforting him.

*I care for you more than anyone darling*, he imagines her saying, eyes glowing green and not dulled like he remembers them being, soft tinkling from her jewelry as she leans forwards, voice the warmest thing he's ever heard and his breathing evens out, *nothing will ever change that Ranboo, my littlest one my pride and joy*.

Snaking one hand into a pocket, Ranboo gently touches at the golden cariad bead, pads of his fingers rolling the cylinder around, feel the dips and grooves of it, and now that he's a little calmer, he thinks.

About earlier, Reshaa giving him a present for no reason, how she dismissed him so easily, never has in the past, about what father said, *petty theft*, the guards searching his room, like they *were looking for something*, about when mother died, how Reshaa combed through all of her things with an obsession, how she *looked* at him, *eyes narrowed and vicious like he was something that wasn't meant to be here*.

Like he took what was rightfully hers.

And Ranboo's fingers curl painfully around the bead.

--

The walls are finally melting and Ranboo stopped feeling his hands *a while ago* by the time he makes it back to their room that night, trips inside and shrugs his jacket off onto the floor, might actually be passing out before he even gets to his bunk.

He never dreams, whether it's a byproduct of how strung out for sleep he is on a regular basis or because his waking life is plagued by nightmares enough, doesn't matter. Ranboo couldn't care less, is grateful to get any time where his mind is shut off and blissfully silent for once, giving him a chance to recover for whenever he wakes up.

So there's not really a clear gauge for how long it's been between when Ranboo got back and when he's feeling a hot touch at his shoulder, just an all consuming darkness that's starting to recede, sensory inputs filtering back into his sluggish mind.

*Scratchy sheets pressing into face...feet...asleep? Boots still on oopsie doopsie tacky taste in mouth...throat sore screaming fighting- oh Ancients everything hurts, uggghhhhhmmmm warm hands on you fingers brushing at your hair machine oil and our soap and something sweet lavender maybe fingers down face now-*

And Ranboo tips into the touch unthinkingly, makes a rumbling sound deep in his chest and hears a quiet laugh in response, and it's so warm and affectionate, incredible fondness slipping out with each giggle, has him thinking about dimples and mischievous eyes and a star in his arms, words leaving without his permission in a half coherent mumble, "*Mmm tha's all I wanna hear for the res' off'rever sunshine, love you, love'ya so much...*"

"Mmm hmm, mmm hmm. Yes of course, I understand *completely*." A voice teases in light mirth, the fingers that were carding through his bangs moving away, and Ranboo makes a whiny noise protesting, gets another laugh for his troubles, "Come on you, *lump*. You need to get up, eat something, dust yourself off or whatever."

"*M'so tired though...stay with me sunshine, stay for me an' I'll stay for you...*" Ranboo whispers into his pillows, exhaustion weighing him down and enticing him back towards sleep, and there's an affectionate tongue click, the voice sighing in mock exasperation, "Time to get up Boo boy, it's been like, *sixteen hours*, you need food, come on. Up, up!"

Heat curls through him where hands wrap around one of his arms, searing into the bare skin as they tug at him, and he hums sleepily, already nuzzling back down, *star in your arms soft rise and fall of his chest lavender fields and sunny skies*, the voice sounding like it means it more this time when it huffs, “Seriously. Come on, you have to get up... Boo? *Queens past I swear- Ranboo!*”

And Ranboo sits bolt upright, head swimming with how fast he moved and he slumps to the side, nasty headache blooming to life behind his eyes that makes him hiss, pressing fingers into his temples. Despite the pounding in his head, his mind is already wide awake and ready to go, now immediately connecting what he thought was another specter to the reality of *Tubbo* crouched by his bunkside, unhappy tilt to his mouth and Ranboo *panics*.

*Did he hear of course he did oh shit oh fuck did you really say all of that out loud shit shit shit shitshiTSHIT- FIX IT IDIOT! I'm trying okay stop yelling! Well do it faster you incompetent moron-!*

“T-T-Tubbo- I-look I-I- it's not- I-I um I- didn't uh, d-didn't *mean* a-any- um- s-sorry so sorry I-” Ranboo stammers out too fast, feels like he's falling backwards off the parapets, freefall embracing him as he hurtles to the ground, nothing to grab on to nothing to ground himself with, and his claws flex spastically, *stupid idiot can't speak even it's not that hard never listen right over the edge no hesitation-*

“Hey, Boo, hey calm down. It's okay. You're okay, I'm okay, everything's fine.” Tubbo hushes, moving forwards and linking their hands together, others going up to touch at his arm or rest near his bent legs, so many points of contact it makes Ranboo's head spin, “It was just a nightmare, okay? It wasn't real, it can't hurt you, and I'm here anyway, I'd kick it's ass.”

*Nightmare? What is he talking about I just confessed what's-* and Ranboo's brow furrows in confusion until his mind helpfully plays back the last few minutes and he realizes, *oh*, he apparently defaulted to Enderian in his half awake stupor and *Tubbo isn't Ender it's okay he didn't understand he doesn't know he just thinks you had a bad dream you're safe you're okay you can breathe.*

“R-Right, *right*, uh, n-nightmare.” Ranboo plays along, hunches over until he can rest his forehead on his raised knees and takes a few deep breaths, unwinding more when Tubbo starts rubbing two hands across his shoulders, leaving tingling fire trails behind that make all the hair on the back of his neck and tail stand on end.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Tubbo asks in soft sympathy, and Ranboo almost snorts because what a minefield that'd be, nothing he could use that wouldn't worry Tubbo or trip his reflex guilt over what happened with the Raiders, so he shakes his head and lies, “I-I don't really know it... i-it was very dark a-and confusing and I couldn't find you, um, yeah.”

Nice, generic, basic enough not to cause any problems, but not an outright *I don't remember* which Tubbo would never believe, and it seems to work, Tubbo dragging him into a quick side hug, “I'm sorry, Boo. I know how much nightmares suck, even the nonspecific ones.”

No kidding, as if that's not the understatement of the year.

Tubbo has horrible nightmares sometimes, ones that make him wake up screaming and haunt him well into the daylight hours, but it's getting better, Ranboo thinks. He doesn't really want to attribute it solely to him, but Ranboo can't sleep anyway and if Tubbo starts fidgeting, he can usually get him calmed back down again before he wakes himself up.

Sometimes all Ranboo has to do is sit by his bunk and trail careful fingers across his arm, scratch lightly through his hair, but other times, if that doesn't work, he'll sing the lullaby his mother used to hum for him when she laid dying. Ranboo doesn't think he has a particularly nice voice, and Enderian is strange, echoing in weird places, but for whatever reason, it works, settles Tubbo easier than anything.

He's never mentioned it to him though, because Ranboo doesn't want to come across like he's fishing for favors or like Tubbo owes him something. He's more than happy to do it, anything he can to make Tubbo's life that little bit easier, and besides just- *not sleeping while out on missions*, Tubbo seems perkier these days, more energetic and inclined to mischief.

Ranboo thinks back to the last time he remembers Tubbo having chronic dark circles and...it was over a month ago, when he had a few really bad weeks, swamped with memories from New Dawn and the academy, but he got past it, bulled through everything with that internal strength Ranboo was so in awe of.

Tubbo is such an incredible person, wicked smart in a way Ranboo could never be, mind geared towards solving puzzles and fitting pieces and parts back together, not just memorizing information without really understanding anything.

And he may act like he's too tough for it, but Tubbo's one of the kindest, most tender hearted people Ranboo's ever known, cares so much for his friends and family, for people in need, and it feels silly sometimes, but Ranboo really looks up to him, hopes he can someday be a *fraction* of who he is.

"Hey, if you're feeling up to it, you really need to eat." Tubbo tells him gently, guiding Ranboo out of his winding hallways with an easy touch, *so kind so genuine just everything you're not*, hands still splayed across his back and burning through his shirt, "You slept for most of the day, and I *know* you didn't get dinner last night."

Ranboo wants to try and defend himself, but his stomach answers for him, making a series of strange, warping noises that could almost pass for really accented, horribly butchered Enderian, sounds something like *defervescence* and he huffs out a laugh, "Y-Yeah, yeah that'd um, t-that'd probably be a good idea."

"Good man." Tubbo says cheerily, slaps him on the back like he'd do any other day, but the impact jars all of Ranboo's aches and pains that have been quietly simmering in the background. They come roaring to life now, hitting him like a train, and he groans, works his shoulders to try alleviating some of it, feels Tubbo's hands leave him lightning quick and mourns their loss.

"S-Shit! Are you okay?" Tubbo demands, ringing both sets of hands together nervously, antenna twitching up and down a little, "Is it from the other day? Sorry, I-I didn't know you'd hurt yourself *that bad*, I-"



“No, no! No i-it’s okay, I um, I-I met Dream for uh, some hand to hand training last night.” Ranboo says in trepidation, *liar liar all you do is lie- Shut up!-* knows what’s probably coming, and glances at Tubbo warily, *don’t understand why you keep doing this he pushes you too hard I’m going to talk to him he’s got to lay off,* the way his eyes darken and brows draw down, *storm on the horizon*, but he keeps his mouth pressed into a thin line and just blows air hard out of his nose.

“I’m okay, promise, j-just a little sore, um, wanna go get breakfast- er, I guess dinner now?” Ranboo tips his head to the side and tries to hide behind his hair, but Tubbo’s on his left and his bangs fall down across the right, leaving him exposed which is-

*Unfortunate how could such a thing happen in the royal bloodline must be a mistake must be a fluke the one bad seed that made it through the gap,* arches coldly through his ears, like the long stride of sturdy boots across the study’s floor, impossibly straight line of her spine, and Ranboo swallows hard, blinks a few times and goes back to their dorm, to his shitfest half of the room and Tubbo’s militarily organized side, telling himself, *breathe you’re okay you’re here you’re not there she’s not real get it together-*

“Yeah alright.” Tubbo sighs, pushing to his feet, holds a hand out for Ranboo and he takes it gladly, lets Tubbo help haul him up, but instead of lacing their fingers like he really wants, their hands drop apart quickly, leaving his palms cold and empty feeling.

Ranboo blinks at the sharp lights out in the hallway once the door swishes open, has to stand leaning up against the wall while his pupils contract all the way down, not accustomed to so much bright light all the time, and he scrubs a palm into an itchy socket, trailing along after Tubbo.

Given the time, it’s not a surprise how busy their hall is as they head towards the cafeteria, music pouring loudly and discordantly out of several open doors, high pitched shrieking followed by a crash that Ranboo has come to learn means Holil just lost some game to their partner, Luqako strutting past in nothing but a towel as he leaves the showers, someone hurling balled up trash at him from their room that sparks a well meaning shouting match.

It’s...different, being here, *nothing* like what he was used to, dimly lit hallways and clusters of courtiers whispering behind the flicking shape of fans, eyes that always knew how to watch without *looking*, stiff backs and perfectly bland faces, everyone on their toes all the time, dancing around one another trying to find weak spots and guard their own.

Ranboo knew not to expect the same thing when he decided to go with Tubbo, recognized the differences between the royal court and the Syndicate, but thought that instead of insults behind your back, it’d be threats in your face, cracking knuckles and tests of strength to settle arguments, a bunch of dangerous people all stuck in close quarters and tiptoeing past each other, together because they *had to be*.

He couldn’t’ve been more wrong.

It’s chaos, colorful, disorganized, caring *chaos*, it’s hands on your shoulder or arms dragging you in closer, asking if you’re okay if you’re doing alright *and meaning it*. It’s arguments that don’t end in fistfights but play wrestling, voices singing loud and impassioned to music

coming from someone else's room, open doors and open smiles, hearts worn proudly on sleeves like there's nothing to be afraid of by showing what you care about.

Ranboo had whiplash for the first few weeks, thinks he still might, dodging eyes like he was taught, uncomfortable at all of the attention directed at him, *keep your face blank don't give them anything don't give them reason to hurt you*, walking close at Tubbo's side and inclining his head fractionally when their neighbors call out to *both* of them.

"Tubbs! Ran! How's it goin'?" Majabi calls while she's jogging past, clearly late for something and not waiting for an answer as she disappears down the hall with a wave, long, trailing tails the last thing flicking around the corner.

"What's up you two? How ya been?" Bephion asks on their way back into their room, does a complicated handshake with Tubbo that involves all six of their arms and all four of his, leaves Ranboo reeling trying to figure out what just happened.

"Ha! Hey smol, hey tol, y'all going to dinner?" Ellov says with an easy grin that splits wide up the sides of his face, bearing bright red molars and inky gums, flickering light of all eight of his eyes jumping and dancing as Tubbo says something back that makes him laugh.

And unlike Annwyl, their interest is genuine, they *mean it they do*, but Ranboo has a hard time convincing his mind of that, sits and watches helplessly as it starts pulling information and filing it away for later use against his will.

- **Majabi:** absentminded, she'd be easy to take advantage of and convince of things that never happened.

- **Bephion:** dexterous, they'd be dangerous with a dagger so you should strike first before they can.

- **Ellov:** affable, eager to please, learn how to make him laugh and he'll be a good lackey, dull witted and easily manipulated.

*Stop it!* Ranboo screams, seeing the pages fly past with his- *colleagues coworkers neighbors* -information on it, reaches out and rips them from the air, shredding everything apart with his claws but it doesn't matter, the ideas are there, laid out all nice and neat, a battle plan he *refuses* to follow.

*What is wrong with you what is wrong with you*, he thinks in horror, panic slowly beginning to ease in like the tickling of wind high along the parapets of Voidfall, tugging at his clothes at his hair, *why are you like this why do you want to hurt them what have they ever done terrible person*, creaking rattle of chains, bodies slamming against doors, hungry to be let out, *monstrous thing nothing good in you never was no hesitation over the-*

"Hey...so um...s-so it's going to be midsummer in a few days, o-on my planet I mean." And Ranboo snaps out of his head so fast, focusing on the welcome distraction of Tubbo fidgeting next to him, lower set of hands picking at his jacket and upper ones fiddling with each other, "Apidae. Y-Ya'know...where I'm from?"

Dark eyes glance up in his direction, checking to see if he's listening, and Ranboo *always is*, would gladly listen to anything Tubbo ever had to tell him, watches his antenna bob sharply as their eyes meet, "A-Anyway, we usually um, like, my hometown at least, but we like, have a party?"

"Tha's nice." Ranboo says stupidly, cringes inwardly and tries to think past all the banging and rattling he wishes would *calm down*- "Um, I mean. That sounds like a lot of fun, are you going?"

"Y-Yeah...I was thinking of going home for a few days, enjoy the celebration, see my family and-"

*-and he's not going to ask you to go along leave you here like so much unwanted garbage just like I never wanted you just like your mother never-* GET. OUT. Ranboo shrieks, swinging a fist at the specter looming off to his left and it disappears like curling smoke, reforming around his clenched hand and sucks in a breath-

"-and I-I was wondering if um, if you wanted to go with me?"

And it's gone and the doors are silent and Ranboo almost trips where he's walking, *did he just no way nothing works but no he said he asked what-* boggling at Tubbo like he didn't hear him right, "You want *me*...to go with *you*?"

"I- uh, yeah?" Tubbo stammers, flicking his eyes away and Ranboo's heart jumps into his throat, *no I'm sorry please look at me I didn't mean I'm here why*, but they're back almost instantly, like Tubbo made the conscious effort to fight his reflexes, says a lot more sure, "I want you to come spend midsummer with me, I think it'd be a lot of fun, t-that *you'd* have a lot of fun, but if you don't want to I totally get it."

*He wants you to go wants you to be there he wants you around what a novelty what a precious thing*, and Ranboo's vision swims lightheaded, heavy comfort settling in his limbs, keeping him here, keeping him grounded by knowing he is wanted and cared for, murmurs out a wavering, "Y-Yeah...yeah I'd like that."

The smile Tubbo gives him could rival any main sequence star, stretching wide enough both dimples show up in his cheeks, crinkling his dark eyes with laugh lines, "Yeah? O-Okay-okay! *Yeah!* Yeah, this is gonna be great, *oh-*! You're going to have so much fun! There's dancing and drinking and-"

Tubbo suddenly gasps, set of hands flying up to squish his cheeks together, boundless excitement and joy shining in his eyes, "*You get to meet Benson!*"

A slideshow of images pops up in Ranboo's head then, all of them containing the black and yellow fuzzball that is Tubbo's family pet, a *bombini*, something that looked part canine, part gigantic bee, and he smiles slow at how excited Tubbo is, nodding his head as he agrees, "I get to meet Benson."

"Yooo! Oh this is going to be *amazing!* Dude, I haven't been home in- *ages*, like- last time I was there for my birthday maybe? *Queens*, *that's* been a while." Tubbo chatters happily,

bouncing along at Ranboo's side while they head into the mess hall, both of them getting into the same line for the replicator.

Ranboo hadn't had much replicated food before joining the Syndicate, and it's not *that* bad... okay, he's lying, *it's horrible*, nothing the machine spits out even coming close to what the original dish is, and *yes*, he has high standards, but Ranboo feels like they're justified this time.

He hems and haws over what to pick, nose wrinkled slightly tabbing through all the inadequate options, hears a foot tapping behind him and lashes his tail back, smirks when he hears an indignant squawk.

"Rude!" Tubbo insists, but Ranboo can hear the smile clear in his voice, swats him again one more time for good measure and picks his garbage for the evening, declaring, "The conditions I'm forced to suffer under here are unjust, and frankly, *borderline inhumane*, and I will not stand for any maligning of my character nor-!"

"Oh- *piss off!*" Tubbo laughs, shoving Ranboo out of the way, the arm that goes around his waist not falling away immediately, and Ranboo shivers, frozen in place staring dumbly as Tubbo types in his order, only spurred back into moving when those night dark eyes flick up to him in question.

He scrambles off with his tray of 'food' to where the drink machines are, double checks making sure he's getting the right PH water, trying to steer his mind off replaying those few seconds when Tubbo had an arm around him, but it doesn't work, thinks he can still feel it burning under his jacket.

*Ancients*, Ranboo could really use a distraction right now-

"Hey! Ran-boozle!"

-and nope he's changed his mind, illogically tries to duck and hide despite the fact he's one of the taller species here, ends up standing slouched against the side of the drink machine as Ozzi bounds up to him, tries to play it off like he's casually reclining and not attempting to avoid them, "Hello, didn't uh- *didn't see you there-*"

"Oh! Are you playing ragdoll? Lemme have a go!" Ozzi says like that makes *any* sense, and Ranboo doesn't even get a chance to ask them what that *is* before their head rotates one eighty, disturbingly empty neck socket right in his eyes as they chitter in deranged amusement.

"Ancients below- *Ozzi*, put your head back." Ranboo whines, already wasn't looking forward to eating his dinner but now his appetite's really turned, nose wrinkling watching their skull crack back into place, toothy mouth still running, "Huh? Oh-! Sorry, do you have a thing with like, like the holes and stuff? Aaaaah, ah, um, triptychs trigonometry trailblazers trigonometrics ty-"

"Trypophobia." Ranboo supplies only so they'll *shut up*, and Ozzi snaps somehow, pointing boney finger guns at him as a glowing eye winks, "That's the bitch! Departed, you've got

quite the head Ran, wish I could say the same, but mine's not screwed on right. Heyo!"

Ozzi's skull rotates in a fast circle, dispersing their shadowy ears and cocks to the side in its perpetual grin, hands flipping out with their fingers spread wide apart, *real smile*, and Ranboo snorts, can't stop himself finding amusement in their antics, "One of these days your skull's going to fly off doing that."

"You think?" Ozzi chirps, sounds horribly excited by the idea. Admittedly, it's a funny thought, their long muzzled skull spinning off from where it floats over their shoulders like a runaway top, pinging and bouncing off furniture as it goes, and Ranboo ducks his head with a cough, masking the involuntary giggle he makes.

When he looks up though, he sees Tubbo staring at him from across the mess hall, funny little smile on his face and Ranboo's ears flick back because that grin never spells anything but *trouble*, and he glances back down at Ozzi, attempts to make an escape, "Alright, well- it's been, *nice*, seeing you, but I really do have to-"

"Yeah okay sure got it, food and stuff and things just- real quick!" And Ranboo sighs, knows nothing is *ever* quick with Ozzi, about to tell them as much when they say, "Wanted to talk to you about last night-"

And the mess hall *roils*-

*What did you say what did you do figures looming over you pressures compounding crushing you out of existence insane nothing right in your head and they can all tell cracks wide enough to sink claws into fix it solve it mask it can't let them know how wrong you are how easy it is how close to the edge-*

-but he forces the mess hall to straighten back out, knows how to do this, *he can do this*, drops everything from his face and closes himself off in a silent room, takes a sip of air and *begins the show*.

"Oh, sorry about that! We'd just gotten back from a mission and I was a tad over exhausted, shouldn't have been out really." Ranboo says smoothly, covering any chinks in his armor, holds himself very still and lets nothing through but bland interest, *won't let them get a handhold*, tips his head and smiles genially, "Sorry for any trouble. I'm sure it wasn't fair to you, considering how many hours you work, around eight on average, right? Techno should give you a break from time to time, don't you think?"

Ranboo's good at what he does, has a talent for working people over and getting them to think like he wants them to think, steered in the direction they need to be and away from whatever they're prying into.

*Proud to be a liar and manipulator fuck's wrong with you*, he seethes at himself, but it's the only compliment he can pay out, if you could even call it that, claws flexing into the underside of his tray as he thinks, *this is all I have corrupted fruit doesn't fall far from the diseased tree after all*.

But the assumptions he's making are based off interactions with a normal person, so Ranboo is completely unprepared for when Ozzi just- bypasses *everything*, and hums nonchalantly, "Oh I don't mind the extra work, helps keep the depression at bay when I have something to focus on but! That's not what I was talking about."

*Did they really just say that did they really admit something so dangerous do they know who they're talking to do they know what you could do with that*, Ranboo thinks in a tailspin, nasty, yawning chasm of *that half of his mind* widening like a nauseous smile, eager to have something so personal given so candidly, and he *panics*, stumbles away from Ozzi like he's going to physically *do something* to them.

"Uh, you okay?" Ozzi asks in a rare show of being aware of their surroundings, and Ranboo's claws squeal against the plastic tray, desperately wanting something to sink into and not just scratch at, but he bobs his head in a friendly nod, smiles so it doesn't reach his eyes like he was taught, "Of course! Sorry, do I seem a little off? Probably still a little tired then."

*Leave it leave it leave it Ozzi just for once in your cursed existence drop it please I can't do this go away need to be alone don't want to be need something anything someone heat and light hands in yours need sunshine need Tub-*

"Look...I'm sorry about last night, I didn't know that- I just...I don't know." Ozzi sighs, a weird, rattling noise that comes gurgling up from the depths of their shadow torso, "And I *don't know*, okay? But we have these forms you can fill out, at the Ozzpo- at the mail center, to stop getting mail."

"I- *what?*" Ranboo asks, genuinely a little baffled as to where Ozzi's train of thought is even going, just- *why are they talking about mail forms*, "Why would I-?"

"They don't have to be able to reach you if you don't want them to." Ozzi interrupts uncharacteristically soft, looking up at Ranboo with an air that could somehow be called gentle, despite the razor sharp fangs and macabre smile, "You're not alone, a lot of us don't want to be followed anymore."

It feels like he's been hit, air rushing fast out of his lungs, Ozzi's words sinking in to a weak point Ranboo didn't know was still exposed, and *how*, how do they all keep *doing this*, reading him so easily. Maybe he's slipping, lost his edge since coming here since meeting Tubbo, and that thought is terrifying, yanks at him like wind up on the parapets.

Ranboo backs up another shaky step, or tries to, bumping into a wall where he's effectively pinned himself in, nowhere to slink off to no way out, and his tail lashes uncontrollably as he stammers, "I-I- you- y-you don't know w-what you're talking about."

*That was bad that was inadequate can't even mask this what do you think they're going to do with this information blackmail betrayal use it to coax you closer to the edge how fast would you drop over this time-*

"I probably don't." Ozzi shrugs, skull bouncing around with the movement, never clear how much of their cartoonish movements are intentional or not, and they back up a good amount,

giving Ranboo plenty of room to slip past, “But if you ever need’em, you know where to find me.”

It goes against everything he was taught, *don't present your back don't give in don't let them know they got to you*, but Ranboo is shaking hard, feels like he's standing on his tiptoes, gravity relaxing and surrendering him to freefall, *he has to go*.

Worming past Ozzi without a single look back, Ranboo finds where Tubbo is and keeps his eyes locked on him, watches his wings flare and buzz as he talks, boisterous laughter cutting above everything else, brightest spot in the room by far, and slowly, it feels like his feet ease back to the floor.

The table Tubbo's sitting at is pretty full, but when Ranboo comes up behind him, without even saying anything to get his attention, Tubbo slings his legs off the spot next to him, leaving enough space for Ranboo to drop into. *He...saved room for me*, and it really shouldn't be as big of a deal as Ranboo is making it out to be, but he can't remember if anyone's ever cared enough to want him next to them, smiles around a forkful of his nasty replicated dinner.

A shoulder nudges into his, touch warm and familiar and sparking so many desperate, hopeful things, and Ranboo looks over, at where Tubbo is grinning at him like an asshole, feels his heart stutter in his chest when he snarks, “See? Told you it wasn't that bad, smiley pants.”

*Love you love you so much I don't know what to do with it*, and he swallows hard, can't take his eyes off Tubbo as he turns to answer someone else, lost in the way his nose crinkles when he laughs, antenna bobbing and jumping in time to his voice, how expressive his face is, everything he's feeling written in that smile and those laughing dark eyes, *Ancients no one else sunshine just you always been you*.

Someone calls Ranboo's name though and he snaps out of it, turns to address them and throws- *your cariad love him so much sunlight and joy and want him around forever please stay with me please love me*- all of *that* into the room it's supposed to stay locked away in, focus on the people around him.

Despite actually haven gotten sleep, Ranboo feels exhausted, mind a crackling mass of static that greys out everything else, but he can't just stare listlessly off into space like he wants to. There's people at the table, *watching you assessing you have to keep up appearances*, and he shoves all of the uncomfortable things out and plays pretend, acts like he's invested in the conversations happening around him.

It's like reading off a script, laugh here ask a question there, pick your voice up so it has emotion, remember to let others speak, be friendly be personable, don't let them see how miserable you are, how tired and drained and dead you feel, be *entertaining* be *fun* be *normal*.

Ranboo laughs but it sounds like it's coming from miles away, hollow and stripped of any real personality, but he hopes it's enough to fool them, that none of them care enough to look

at him too hard, that he can pass under their radars. He's always been good at that, because back *there*, at the palace, it was a double edged sword, having attention focused on you

On the one hand, it helped remind Ranboo he was *real*, that he existed that he mattered on some level, but on the other, having *eyes* directed at you was never good, *it was never good in the long run they always saw through everything*, left him a shaking, trembling mess for nights on end, haunted by their voices running nonstop in his mind.

*Ancients*, Ranboo does not want to deal with any of this pretending shit right now, but he's got to, and his ear flicks in an agitated spasm he can't control. Listlessly pushing the leftover food on his plate around, he thinks about the soft solitude of their room, lights always dimmed low for his sensitive eyes, wants nothing more than to be back there, where he doesn't have to *try* so hard all the time.

"Hey." Tubbo says when there's a break in the conversation, some people getting up to go grab new drinks, voice low so it's just for Ranboo, and he turns to him gratefully, so much easier dealing with just one person, "I know it's kinda late, but would you um, would you wanna go ahead and leave for Apidae tonight? It'll take us about a day to get there anyway."

Right now, nothing sounds better than some peace and quiet, just him and Tubbo, their ship running under them and space zipping past, flying faster than very horrible thing trying to catch him, and Ranboo says like the last exhale that leaves you dropping into bed after a long day, "Yes."

They make their goodbyes and head back to the room, and as soon as the door hisses shut, Ranboo unwinds, layers of paranoia sloughing off like sheets of sand over the sides of cliffs. Finally, he can relax, doesn't have to worry about keeping his face pleasant or tail still, lets it wave behind him tiredly and pulls his duffle out.

The room is quiet while they get their stuff together, only thing breaking it the gentle humming Tubbo's doing absentmindedly as he packs, but it's nice, soothes along Ranboo's frayed nerves like a salve. Silence used to haunt Ranboo like a ghost, clung to his back and breathed harshly in his ears, left everything achingly open for whispers to slip in, but silence isn't like that with Tubbo.

It's gentle, soft and comforting, a brief respite from the insanity of his mind. It's something Ranboo has come to enjoy deeply, greatly cherishing the time they spend alone together, nothing really needing to be said but still finding pleasure in the other's company. Ranboo's not sure if feeling like this is normal, simple contentment coming from hardly anything at all, hasn't been this close with anyone else in a long time.

He can remember with perfect clarity every memory of his mother, but not really the emotions associated, doesn't know if it was because he was so young or if that information just isn't saved by his brain, wonders if it was like that with her, if he felt comfortable enough with silence then.

*Probably, everything was different before*, Ranboo thinks morosely as they're walking towards the hangars, duffel slung over his shoulder, not for the first time wondering how things would have been if his mother had lived. The thought used to keep him awake at night,



helped stop some of the sobs from leaving his mouth, envisioning a life that was filled with kind eyes and gentle touches, actual voices responding to his.

A life where he was *cared for*.

But that's not what he got, instead, it was long empty nights and corridors, harsh reprimands after he asked one too many questions, hasty words brushing him off, shoulders turned and the backs of heads, nobody looking at him nobody caring about him, his father's apathy his sister's cruelty, *which one are you again go take that long walk over a short drop-*

His claws flex quickly, anger snapping through him, but it's brief, everything that had been building up knocked out of him last night, but it does give Ranboo pause where they're walking across the central hub. None of them ever showed an ounce of concern for him, it hurts, but he can see it now, can admit it, honestly thought none of them would even notice when he made the decision to walk out of his dorm that day.

His father always acted like he was a burden, Reshaa wanted him out of Voidfall from day one, none of the others ever did anything to stop the tormenting or the name calling, kicked his knees and made him stumble in line, so *why*, in the name of the *fucking cursed Ancients of the Deep Void Below*, do they keep trying to *contact him*?

It used to be messages coming through on his old handheld from palace staff, enquiring about his studies or when he was expecting to be home, all of it impersonal and easily ignored, especially after Ranboo hurled the fucking thing into a smelter on Jaqu, thought that'd be the end of it.

And then the letter showed up, and he doesn't know what it said, didn't recognize the handwriting, but Ranboo would know his father's personal seal anywhere, has the image seared into his brain from *years* of staring at it where it was embroidered on the back of his cape. After a lifetime of neglect, his father has suddenly decided Ranboo's worth his attention for whatever reason, and the thought makes him furious, that he thinks he can just *waltz* back in and ruin everything Ranboo's trying to make for himself.

Whatever his father has to say, Ranboo doesn't want to hear it, wishes he could slam a door in his face like he does with all the nasty things lurking in his head, but his eyes catch on the mail center and he remembers and his heart jumps.

"Hey what're you-? Aw, wanna go say goodbye to your bestie?" Tubbo teases lightly from up ahead, and Ranboo sniffs, falling into the easy pattern of their banter as his tail snaps behind him, and he sticks his nose in the air, "I am *not besties* with *Ozzisosteon*."

"Sure you're not."

Ranboo doesn't bother dignifying that with a response as he heads over to the counter, nerves prickling hard under his skin, weirdly disappointed to see one of the other clerks working, but he pushes the thought from his mind, asks politely, "Excuse me, do you have some of those forms available for uh, for screening mail?"

And it doesn't take long to fill them out, and it shouldn't be a big deal, scratching words onto a sheet of paper, but Ranboo's hand tremors around the pen, pulse thundering under his ears like it does when he's running down streets behind Tubbo, like he's got the Eshachi's trigger in his hands and another ship in his sights, *heady rush of triumph*, and it's small, but it still feels like a victory spelling out *Annwyl* under '*Unauthorized Senders*'.

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### **Lesson Forty: Do not let them know what's precious to you**

"-s-so then I told Ferhoo that he couldn't um- t-that he was wrong, and uh, a-and that- I-I-I just- u-uh-!" Ranboo says way too quick and loses the sentence, flops back with a groan because this keeps happening and he *hates it*, but it's like his mind runs faster than he can talk and he doesn't know how to make it slow down.

"My brain's too fast." He grumbles, wiggles further up with bed when he feels shaky fingers brush lightly against the tip of his horn, sighs when Mama's hand sinks all the way into his hair, mussing it into his eyes while he giggles.

Today is not one of her good days, but Ranboo *had* to come see her because no one else would listen when he tried to tell them about stupid Ferhoo. He knows he should probably leave her alone, rolls onto his stomach and frowns at the bags under her eyes, how grey she is, lips dry and cracked, wishes she would just get some sleep and get better already.

"Mama? Why don't you sleep more?" He asks, kicking his legs aimlessly in the air, fidgeting like he knows Meleeri hates but she's not here so he can do what he wants, and Ranboo grins, kicks his legs harder out of spite.

"I...I do darling but...but it doesn't seem to...seem to help much." She sighs with a funny looking smile, eyes barely cracked open, dull green of them so different than everyone else's, like she's a house with the lights out inside.

Propping his chin up in a hand, Ranboo wonders if there's anything he could do to help her get her lights back on, jumping when the door unexpectedly groans open, and he flips around, surprised because no one usually bothers them, and then his eyes blow wide as he scrambles upright, "F-Father!"

Father doesn't exactly do a double take, but his ears flick up, a very rare tell as to what he's feeling and Ranboo preens that he picked up on it, wilts a little though once his eyes snap off him- *dismissed get back in line* -jumping to a spot over his shoulder, "He shouldn't be here, Ettaah."

"H-He's my *son* and...I'll see him as much as I want to." Mama's voice says more steady than he's ever heard, and Ranboo shivers a little at how cold it seems, looks at her cautiously because like this, she sounds just like everyone else.

"Ettaah-" Father begins in a tone that has Ranboo's tail curling up close to his chest, but Mama's eyes flash like the lights that dance in the sky at night, chin tipped back and gaze slitted, ethereal and just a little dangerous when she says, "Leave it Zeetho."

And father never *ever* gets told what to do, and for a second, it looks like he's going to listen to her, but then his gaze hardens and Ranboo almost scrambles off the bed because *he knows that look* and it's very not good.

"Rohsee, take Ranboo back to his quarters immediately-"

"N-No!" Ranboo cries, scooting further up the mattress, emboldened by the thought that his mama is right here and *she wants him to be here wants him to stay nobody else does just her don't wanna leave her*, but it ends up not mattering, the guard scooping him up anyway.

"*Stop!*" He shrieks, flailing around but Rohsee's grip is strong and he doesn't waiver, hauls Ranboo off from his mother's side howling like a banshee, "*STOP IT!*"

There's a firm grip on the back of his head instantly, and Ranboo's forced to look up into glowing green eyes, feels all the moisture leave his mouth because father's composure slips for the briefest second and the snarling, spitting anger in his gaze is so apparent.

"You're too old for this kind of behavior. Stop with the theatrics, you know better than that." Father says, hand leaving Ranboo as soon as he clicks his mouth shut obediently, wipes it discreetly against his pants leg, but Ranboo catches it, feels shame twist up nasty and ugly in his chest, especially when father adds on to the guard, "Make sure he gets a bath, a *thorough* one, do you understand?"

"Yes, sire." Rohsee intones, and then they're gone, Ranboo tucked in his arms, cowed into being quiet all the way back to his quarters, sits with his head down while the servants draw the bath and doesn't complain as they scrub his skin practically raw.

None of them answer his questions, won't explain why Ranboo needed a bath so badly even though he had one this morning, don't tell him why they wear masks and gloves as they do it, nor the reason for taking away the clothes he was wearing despite them not having a single rip.

It starts to make Ranboo nervous, all the weird activity and turned shoulders, *the silence*, and he fidgets, can't stop talking, growing louder and more agitated until they *have* to pay attention to him, screaming out threats that don't make sense to tired eyes and up turned noses.

But in the end, they leave him alone like they always do, locking the door behind them for good measure, and Ranboo bangs his fists on it until they hurt, confused and upset and *scared*. He wails for his mama *his brothers his sisters his father his governess just someone anyone please help please I'm here please look at me please pay attention I'm good I promise I can be good*, staggers back from the closed door and screams till his voice cuts out.

No one comes though, the door remains shut, and he stands there panting, feels like something impossibly heavy is crushing him as his lower lip wobbles, little voice whispering at the back of his mind, *no one cares about you left you here like you're nothing wonder if they'll remember to come let you back out-*

And he makes a strangled sound of panic, claws biting in sharp to his palms, but the pain helps recenter his mind because that's not *true*, they care about him *they do*, he just- h-he just did something wrong but that's okay, that's fine, Ranboo can be better he can learn to be better. His body quakes around him, sick glide of some phantom pain racing out from his chest and burning down his arms, settling heavy and horrible at the tips of his fingers.

Clutching his hands to his front, Ranboo tries to rub the sensation away but it won't go, and he whines, wishing his mama was here, wants her hands soothing through his hair, and closing his eyes on a hitched inhale, he pictures where he wants to go.

Meleeri says he's not supposed to be teleporting yet, something about developing cortexes and *lack of mental aptitude*, but Ranboo knows better than her, remembers learning in class the general coordinates for Voidfall, uses that as his base point to figure out where mama's room is.

He's only gone short distances before, from one end of his room to the other, never something this far, goes crashing out of mid air with a yelp and thuds heavy on the floor, head woozy and struggling to focus, body refusing to cooperate as it twitches with the weird tightness of slipping through reality.

*Plush rug under hands moonflowers and sharp bite of something metallic soft beeping of machines shallow breathing*, and he knows he's in the right spot, stumbles to his feet and only sways a little bit, makes his way over to her bedside.

"Ma-" Ranboo tries but his voice is beyond hoarse, and he has to clear his throat a few times, tugging at her blankets to get her attention, "*Mama.*"

"Ranboo?" She murmurs, head tipping towards him without opening her eyes, brows drawn down in either pain or confusion, "I- how...how did you-?"

"I teleported." Ranboo tells her proudly, chest puffing up and one eye slits open, crinkling as her cheek lifts in a smile, and she holds an arm out, all the invitation he needs to clamber up into bed. He finds his usual spot against her side, head tucked into the crook of her neck, and sighs at the arm that goes around him, snuggling into her embrace while she coos, "So proud of you dear one...my littlest...so...so talented already."

Ranboo trills happily and coils his tail around her arm, finally relaxing after being taken out of here earlier, thinks he might fall asleep, but drags himself back into consciousness when mama whispers, "Darling, don't let...don't let your father know...you're...you're here."

"Why?" He whispers back, tipping his head up to look at her, but her eyes are shut again, dark bags under them, hollow set to her cheeks that he doesn't remember being there, and Ranboo has to pat her face gently to get her to respond.

"He'll...take you from...from...me again." Mama says softly, lips barely moving, looks like she's really trying but sleep has a firm grasp on her mind, and Ranboo can tell she's losing, "And I...and I- I d-don't have...have m-much...much time le-"

“It’s okay mama, you can tell me later. Go to sleep now.” Ranboo tells her gently, brushing wayward hair out of her face, hopes she feels better when she wakes up, but it’s a stupid wish, he thinks with a sour expression and lays back down with a sigh, because she never does.

Absentmindedly running his fingers over her cariad braid, Ranboo fiddles with the golden bead at the end, eyes tracking over the designs he knows by heart, the ones father carved for her before he confessed. Moonflowers and the sharp geometric lines of the Daysetter crown, hash marks that mean nothing to him but something to them, and wonders what his will look like, what designs his cariad will carve for him.

*Books...dragons maybe,* Ranboo thinks sleepily, nodding off with his hand still loosely draped around mama’s braid, metal of her jewelry growing cold in his grasp, *can’t wait to meet them can’t wait to love them...for them to love me.*

When he wakes up the next morning, he’s back in his room and the door’s still locked, but this time, there’s a guard standing there watching him with unblinking green eyes, and Ranboo feels like there’s something tight wrapped around his throat.

--

*Twenty six minutes left review what you know*

Blurry blue white lines of hyperspace whiz past, a hypnotic spiral that’s easy to get lost in as Ranboo imagines clapping his hands together and pulling them apart, a huge codex of information expanding out that he can cycle through at will, pulls up everything he knows related to-

***Apidae:** C class planet orbiting around Kisen, main sequence star with a projected one point two million years of regular solar output left, part of the Makhasi system, third largest in the Sivem Quadrant, joined the empire approximately-*

No, wrong, not *joined*, *conquered*, and he clicks his tongue, strikes through that piece of information and rewrites it, irritated with himself that it hadn’t already been changed, *should know better by now but what can you expect from a slow witted stuttering- shut up, reviewing information I don’t have time for you-*

*-conquered approximately on stardate eighty nine of the Imperial year two thousand and twenty one, currently serves as the main manufacturing hub for all Starfleet cruisers frigate class and larger, no direct forced labor, but there is a very aggressive system of institutionalized career placement that does not encourage much deviation from jobs which do not benefit the shipyards-*

Alright that’s the basics, a quick overview more or less, but now comes the tricky part, the important part, *the people*, because Ranboo’s got to know how to behave, isn’t going to risk offending anyone or stepping on toes, only has one chance to get this right so he makes sure to dredge up everything he knows related to-

***The Mellifera:** Bipedal race of beings with extra set of functional arms connected to the torso directly beneath primary limbs, possess the ability of flight through insectoidal wings, also split off into primary and secondary sets, antenna act as another sensory organ that are capable of picking up on electromagnetic fields, gravitational shifts and thermal readings.*

Hmm, clinical and detached, not really what he's wanting, maybe if he just- *nothing else worth knowing they're beneath us don't trouble yourself with trite topics* -and he can see her standing in front of him, arms folded behind her back and spine ramrod straight, and his fingers burn with the need to dig into something, *I told you I don't have time for you go away I'm busy-*

Focus-

*The Mellifera are hardworking and compassionate people, will likely be welcoming to outsiders, mind your manners and you should be fine, don't mention the empire don't mention where you come from, watch what you say keep a handle on things, show respect to everyone, very important, they're a very close knit and family oriented group-*

Better, he's doing better, but then, his mind pitches sharply to the side finding an opening and it's just-

*-and they're easy to take advantage of, could use those family ties to control them easier than anything, manipulation is simple when they're this unguarded, wear their hearts on their sleeves dangerous and stupid don't let anyone know you don't let them get that close see what happens when you do vulnerable weak deserve what they got-*

NO! No! *Stop bad wrong stop it behave be better be anything else-* and Ranboo's hands twitch towards his arms automatically, redirect a second later when he remembers what he's supposed to be doing now, buries his claws in the thick corded bracelet around his wrist, presses in until there's a dull pain against his skin.

It's better though, *it's better right*, not to be punching holes in his arms, it *has* to be, but... why is it such a big deal in the first place, he's just being overdramatic and looking for attention, fingers spasming when he hears that deep, monotone voice right next to him, *you're too old to be acting so childish throwing temper tantrums and acting out-*

Ranboo bares his teeth, claws sinking in deeper, shredding as they go, *it's a disgrace an embarrassment absolutely pathetic*, teal cloak swishing at the edges of his vision as he strides past, Daysetter crown and silver streaked hair, looking straight ahead and never *ever* at him, *your actions speak to all of us and you do a disservice to your family we never wanted you your mother never-*

Bright hot prick of pain against his wrist has Ranboo jerking his head down, slowly pulling his claws free of the tattered remains of the bracelet, feels shame start to bubble up because he's just gone through another one and it's only been a few days.

This is industrial cording, it's supposed to last for *months-*

“What color do you want?”

Ranboo snaps his head to the side, to where Tubbo's rummaging around in a glove compartment, colorful bits of knotted cords passing around his hands, and his mouth is very dry but *Tubbo's waiting for an answer have to say something know how to behave open your mouth speak evenly you idiot- I said GO. AWAY-*

"Y-Yellow." Ranboo stutters a little despite his best efforts, fingers flexing automatically in reprimand, but then Tubbo turns around with a big grin crinkling the corners of his dark eyes, and everything finally quiets in his head, "Good choice, Boo. Here."

Tubbo tosses the new bracelet across the gaps in their chairs, and Ranboo only fumbles slightly catching it, ignoring the way his hands tremor as he pulls off the ruined one and slips this one on. It fits snug against his skin, soft but sturdy to withstand his claws, at least for a little bit, few days tops apparently.

And the fact that he *needs* it has Ranboo tugging the cuff of his bomber down so he doesn't have to look at it, but it's *still there*, he can feel it like a brand around his wrist, a permanent reminder that his head is very wrong and very messed up and he's not okay *and hasn't been for a long time doors rattling shame and-*

"Is yellow your favorite color?" Tubbo asks seemingly out of the blue, and everything in Ranboo's mind grinds to a halt, frozen because he actually has to think about it, maybe puts in more thought than necessary combing through his compendium, but it's a welcome distraction.

"I don't...think so." He says after a minute, can't find any information related to something as trivial as *favorite color*, "I'm not sure I have one...why?"

Tubbo shrugs, turning so he's more squarely facing Ranboo, lower set of arms folding across the armrest of his chair as he leans forwards, "Dunno, you just seem to like yellow, it's your usual go to."

"It is?" Ranboo asks baffled, flicking past random memories trying to find any where his color preference mattered, is shocked to find *multiple* instances of him picking yellow when given an option. There's images of his hands reaching out for cheery colored notebooks and sunny blankets, eyes lingering longer on snack packaging with the bright shade, and he's now realizing most of the corded bracelets he wears are the same vibrant hue.

"Huh." He says, slouching back into his chair, confused but not in a bad way, as to where this obvious favoritism came from, is thinking maybe it's somehow related to his preference for gold jewelry, when Tubbo makes an excited noise, twisting around quickly, "Oh! I *love* this song!"

He cranks the volume on the dash, entire cockpit flooded with the pounding of drums and electric wailings of guitars, lyrics in a language Ranboo doesn't understand, but pegs as coming from the Ilopium system, something fast paced and enthusiastic and *blindingly exuberant*.

Tubbo nods his head to the side and sings along, loud and uninhibited, shoulders jumping in time to the music as he bobs in his seat, antenna dipping and waving, perfect picture of zeal

for life and tightly bundled happiness, reminds Ranboo of foreign sunlight baking deliciously hot into his skin, playing tag over rooftops, dancing barefoot around shipping containers.

The sound of his voice is like warm, calloused rough hands in his, fingertips tracing over knuckles and veins, searing body heat like there's a star in his arms, it's every lovely memory Ranboo cards through at night if he can't sleep, sunlit with affection he's never known, gilded and perfect and-

And Tubbo catches him staring, brilliant smile growing wider as giddy laughter spills out, and *oh*, Ranboo thinks, watching Tubbo slip his eyes closed while the last chorus thunders to an end, mortal equivalent of a beam of sunlight, *oh that's why*.

Hooking a thumb under his jacket sleeve, Ranboo pulls it back so he can see the vibrant snatch of yellow, trails finger pads over it like he painfully remembers moving them across Tubbo's face. *Hi sunshine*, he thinks both at the bracelet and the memory of Tubbo under the glowing lichen of Tjhia-Yuet, the silvery light reflecting off the high points of his face, how scared Ranboo was to touch him but doing it anyway, thumbing away silent tears that burned his skin.

He wonders when exactly he started associating Tubbo- *happiness and joy and love* -with yellow, and it might've been then, on Tjhia-Yuet, that night he grew bold or stupid enough to pull Tubbo into him as he was falling asleep. That night Ranboo laid awake until morning feeling like he had a supernova curled up on his chest, thinks maybe that's when this whole mess started, when he looked at Tubbo in the watery dawn light and realized he never wanted to be anywhere else.

"Hey..." Tubbo calls, and compared to a few seconds ago, his voice is so soft, like the barest whisper, a secret only for him, and when Ranboo turns, the smile aimed at him is nothing but genuine and encouraging, "I'm real proud of you, you know that, right?"

Ranboo swallows hard, a thousand wailing things rising up saying he's *lying*, but they get brushed away with a gentle touch, one he hardly ever feels, and his bangs fall down past his right eye but *he knows she's there*, can hear her gentle humming, *precious thing darling one proud of you always have been my littlest one my son*, and he clears his throat harshly, "T-Thanks."

"O'course, Boo." Tubbo says, looks like he's going to say something more, but an alert from the Eshachi draws his attention, and he turns away with a slow grin unfurling across his lips, hands moving fast and excited over the controls in a pattern Ranboo recognizes instantly.

*Easing up on the throttle engines winding down into lower gear hyperspace slowing around us which means-* and his stomach twists up into knots seeing the blue of hyperspace drop away, the yellow green planet hanging in front of them, vast spread of chartreuse plains and emerald oceans, white of clouds marbling the atmosphere, and where it's rotated away from Kisen, the surface glowing with massive hexagonal webs of infrastructure.

*Shipyards and factories and institutionalized labor and the empire's greatest manufacturing plant Apidae-*



“Ah, I swear, never gets old seeing it.” Tubbo sighs, takes control of the Eshachi and moves them towards the planet, easily dodging the few imperial satellites that orbit Apidae like buzzards. They remain passive as the Eshachi passes, likely only configured to sound the alarms if spacecraft big enough to threaten the planet drop out of hyperspace within range, but still, the fact that they’re here, like guard dogs, like *jailors*, makes Ranboo’s heart constrict.

*Why did you think it was a good idea coming here saying yes even knowing who you are,* Ranboo worries as they descend through the atmosphere, heading towards a part of the planet that’s in the middle of the day cycle, giving him a clear view of the shipyards that stretch across the land like a tumor, *you have no right being here do you think you’re allowed what’s wrong with you elitist sympathizer imperial dog-*

“I can hear you overthinking, stop, you’re going to blow a fuse.” Tubbo laughs, but it tapers off into awkward silence, only broken by the sounds of the Eshachi streaking down through the atmosphere.

Ranboo wishes he could find any words to answer him with, but his throat is cinched tight in panic as layers of fluffy white clouds glide past the viewport, mind snarled up and around the thought that *he shouldn’t be here terrible person prince from the empire that’s enslaved these people intruding on their homes on their lives what was he thinking he can’t-*

And Tubbo isn’t able take his eyes off the controls while he’s trying to land, but Ranboo can tell he *wants* to, sees his antenna flick in his direction, little subconscious acknowledgment, furrow in his brow as he says, “You know you can tell me what’s bothering you. I’m always here for you...for whatever you need, okay?”

*Because I care about you,* whispers warm in *his* voice but it’s right in Ranboo’s ear, *not real*, and he shivers, very, very thankful when it doesn’t add on the rest of what it usually says, loosens his nerves though, gives him room to admit quietly, “I-I’m just- *um*, j-just apprehensive...about being here, g-given who I am...w-where I’m *from-*”

“Hey, no. You’re not like that, okay? You’re a good person, Ranboo, doesn’t matter where you came from-”

*Lie terrible person monster horrible people what about my planet my people you think we deserve this,* chains suddenly dropping away one at a time in his head, faster than Ranboo can try and force them back on, jumps away when a *hand* swipes at him, laughing, empty eye sockets that sink for miles staring back through the crack in the door, *hello did you miss us we’re still here try as you might give in come back welcome home-*

“-and I regret saying all of that shit. I shouldn’t’ve let my anger get the better of me...and I-I know that doesn’t help, because it’s still in your head, right? What I said?” Tubbo says, voice a distant echo, but it reaches Ranboo way down in his winding hallways, helps pull him out, gets him away from the darkness that howls and wails like a yawning maw behind him.

And as soon as Ranboo’s free, he gets lost instantly in those space dark eyes that turn to him quick, always so clearly broadcasting whatever Tubbo’s feeling, and right now, they’re fiery with determination, with affection and care and lo- and Ranboo chokes on the air in his lungs

because *he's imagining things*- "Well, listen to this memory boy, because you have *every* right to be here."

He wants to argue with him, *is going to argue with him*, but Tubbo fixes him with a look, the same one he gives to particularly stubborn gears, like you can try all you want but he *is* going to get his way, "You're not responsible for your ancestors' actions and you're not responsible for anyone's now. You are not your family, Ranboo."

It feels like a star's exploded to life in his chest, blasting everything out of existence, whites out the maze of hallways and the things trying to crawl free, leaves him breathless and weak in the knees, light headed with terrible euphoria because hearing that is *everything*.

He's completely overwhelmed with emotions he doesn't have names for, starts clicking in the back of his throat, affection threatening to strangle him whole at the way Tubbo smiles at him, all gentle edges and fathomless understanding, *love you love you so much sunshine can't do this without you only one for me*, and Ranboo's got to tell him, *he's going to tell him*, mouth opening, words about to tumble free-

*-but it'd be watching his dark eyes go wide in surprise, unsure uncomfortable expression dragging his face down, care for you but not like that, you're not mine and I'm not yours sorry awkward silences that stretch and grow, pushing you two apart, how long until he stops looking at you talking to you panic and fear and nausea can't lose him can't have to got to must have need to-*

-and his mind is his greatest asset, redirects hard out of a sense of self preservation, keeps him safe keeps everything hidden, and Ranboo winds up shakily saying instead, "Y-You can't know what that m-means to me."

"I think I have an idea." Tubbo says with a small smile, looks back at the viewport as they finally exit the bank of clouds, sunlight streaming in and blinding Ranboo for a minute. Once he blinks past it though, he can make out the land rushing past underneath them, anxieties forgotten for a second as he scoots forwards in his seat, enraptured with how much *green* there is racing beneath them, bushy tops of trees and long, yellowed grasses waving in the wind.

The Eshachi swoops to the side and there, on the horizon, a town spreads out across the land, nothing huge, rather small actually, earth toned buildings nestled together that look a little closer than they should, and Ranboo does some quick mental math, ears flicking up when he figures out how low Tubbo's flying.

"Uh- s-shouldn't you be a little further up?" He asks hesitantly, watching a dirt road zip past, can easily make out figures moving along it, worries about the ship clipping some of the grass covered roofs, but Tubbo just grins, urging them even lower, "Shhh, just wait."

Ranboo makes an unhappy noise in the back of his throat that lilts up at the end with confusion, because there, further down the road but rapidly approaching is a cluster of smallish figures, all jumping and waving in the middle of the path, and his eyebrows shoot up, "Are those-?"

“Yup.” Tubbo says and then tips the Eshachi to the side, blowing past the gaggle of children and probably knocks the whole lot of them on their assess, but he’s grinning as he does it, evening out and angling towards a swath of open fields, “They always like to be the first ones welcoming me home.”

“That’s sweet.” Ranboo murmurs with a small smile, can’t help thinking about what kind of welcome he’d get if he went back to Annwyl, *empty landing pad servant sent out to collect you like an uninteresting package cold light and cold hallways*, drops the thought once Tubbo barks out in laughter, “You say that now! Wait until they fill your shoes with grasshoppers.”

*It’s still nice though...seeing how they care*, Ranboo thinks as they land, dust clouds billowing up from the dry plains, grasses snapping erratically in the wind the Eshachi’s turbines kick up, *they wait for you to come home are excited to see you*, quick shuffle of their things together, claws picking at his bracelet waiting for the cargo bay to open, *no one’s ever waited for me no one’s ever cared that I’m around-*

“Hey-” Tubbo bumps into his shoulder, jostling Ranboo a bit, and doesn’t move away, stays leaned up against him so his burning body heat starts to melt through the contact, smiles until his eyes crinkle, “-I’m really glad you decided to come with me.”

*-except for you no one’s ever cared about me except for you love you so much sunshine I’m yours forever-*

“Me too.” Ranboo murmurs back, throat thick with everything trying to leak out, stinging in his nose like sulfuric gases, settled in his chest like magma, hands shaking with the repressed need to reach out and gingerly link their fingers together, but before he can make a stupid mistake, Tubbo steps back, heads down the ramp, and as always, Ranboo is helpless following after him.

Apidae is hot but blessedly dry, insects singing loud in the afternoon sun while they tromp through the long grasses, painfully bright blue sky stretching wide overhead, and after a few minutes of uncomfortable squinting, Ranboo relents and fishes his sunglasses out of his duffle. They help immensely, but he doesn’t like wearing them, weird hang up in his head about having his eyes covered.

*It’s because no one ever looked at you back there*, Ranboo keeps pace with Tubbo as he leads them out of the countryside and back towards the little town, *don’t wanna go back to that lose what you have with him how it feels knowing he’s looking at you*, can’t stop his tail as it flicks out automatically and brushes against the end of one of Tubbo’s gossamer wings, *love knowing he sees your eyes when no one else ever cared to before.*

They step out of the field and onto a dusty dirt road, wildflowers in a thousand hues bobbing along the sides, and Tubbo heads one direction, but Ranboo looks quick in the other, catches a glimpse of hulking shapes on the horizon, beams and scaffolding crisscrossing the lower half of the sky. The shipyards are massive, makes sense given the size of craft they usually produce here, but it makes Ranboo sick, thinking about all the people there, working diligently for an empire that couldn’t care less about them.

He watches Tubbo ahead of him, graceful shape of his wings tucked against his back, how they're iridescent and the light ripples across them, kaleidoscope of colors like nebula out in deep space, knows how smart he is, the way his brain works the most incredible thing Ranboo's ever seen, and despairs violently that anyone would ever look at him and see anything lesser.

Ranboo flexes his claws at the hot spike of anger that swirls through his veins, hopes there aren't any enforcers in town, but he should be okay, should be fine, sparring with Dream usually keeps him settled for a few days after, but just the *thought* of someone shoving Tubbo around, looking down their nose at him calling him- *good obedient little drone mindless worker bee* -has Ranboo seeing red.

"Heads up, we've got incoming." Tubbo says in a mock serious voice, same words he uses when they're out on jobs with all the playfulness of wrestling back at HQ, and Ranboo snaps out of it, is about to ask him *what* when he hears the loud chattering growing closer.

A mob of children round the corner up ahead, shrieking in delight as they barrel down the road towards them, and Tubbo drops to a knee, arms flung out to catch the first few that come streaking at him, their high pitched, giggling voices speaking fast in Apian as they swarm him. Ranboo has to take a few quick steps back, tail lashing behind him erratically at all the sudden noise and movement, sees flashes of grimy walls and blood darkened floors, blinks hard until he's back on a dusty red road under a deep blue sky.

*Breathe you're okay you're fine you're here it's okay*, snaps his head down erratically when there's a light tug at one of his pants legs, sees a little boy with impossibly dark eyes and blonde curls grinning up at him, lilting words flowing out that Ranboo doesn't understand, and he stutters, "Uuuuh, s-sorry, I-I don't- *um*, I-I-I- it's just-

And as soon as standard leaves his mouth, the children switch seamlessly, now much more interested in him, and Ranboo fights the urge to teleport away as they crowd closer, looking at him with sparkling, intelligent eyes, antenna bobbing in excitement while they pepper him relentlessly with questions.

"Hey serrah where'ya from?"

"Why're you so tall? Did your mom make you eat all your pollen cakes too?"

"Woah! You have a tail! How'd ya get it?"

"Can you give me a piggyback ride?"

Ranboo's trying to keep it together, he really *really is*, doesn't want to come across as rude or snobbish, but all the little hands on him and direct attention is driving him up the walls, and he swallows fast and hard, feeling like there's a cord wrapped tight around his throat, fingers spasming because *there's a knife there a second later gonna sing for us songbird let me loosen those vocal cords up for you white hot pain and that's when the screaming started-*

"Hey hey hey, *amicis*, back up, give'im room to breathe." And Ranboo knows that voice, latches onto it like a lifeline, goes tripping out of *then* and stumbles into *now*, straight into

two sets of arms that wrap around him and pull him close, and it's sunshine and lavender and machine oil, playing tag breathless and excited, it's dancing barefoot in the cargo hold, everything he's ever wanted, and Ranboo's tail winds around Tubbo's waist, terrified of him pulling away, *don't leave me don't leave me not again scared don't wanna be alone stay please.*

"S-Sorry, sorry s-sorrysorrysorry-" He stammers under his breath, knows he's making a scene, a bad first impression already and *don't know what else I expected won't listen can't learn unteachable nothing like your sister a disgrace*, but there's warm hands across his back, a few steps closer, until they're completely pressed together, hushed words only for him, "Hey, hey it's okay, Boo. You're okay, no need to apologize it's fine."

*It is not can't believe you're acting like this in public taught you better-* and Ranboo shuts his eyes so he doesn't have to see her, leans down and buries his face in the top of Tubbo's head, relishing in the warm heat radiating off from where the sun's been baking down onto his hair. His heart races, skin prickling like that thermal knife is still burning lines into his neck, across his shoulders, leaving thin off grey scars he hates to see in mirrors, ugly and wispy like cobwebs, like physical manifestations of the cracks his mind is split into.

The memories coat his mind like oil, won't scrub off no matter how hard he tries, and Ranboo is forced to sit there and watch, *relive*, over and over again as that knife makes its trails down his skin, hears his own screams echoing back, bouncing off bare stone walls and concrete floors, the dull, sickening crack when they snapped his horn off, red hot pain like he's never felt burning through his nerves.

Ranboo shudders, twisting his face into Tubbo's hair despite the way his sunglasses dig into his skin, mindful not to squash his antenna and almost sneezes when one brushes across his nose, but it helps remind him that what he's seeing *isn't real*.

Instead of pain and the off metallic scent of blood, Ranboo focuses on the sunlight he can feel on his face, soft rise and fall of Tubbo's chest, the quiet words Tubbo's murmuring seemingly absentmindedly while he runs hands across his back, "You're okay, it's okay, I'm here not going anywhere, promised you, I got you, you'll be safe, promise, won't leave you again-"

And it's too much, makes desperate hope flare in his chest as his mind goes spinning off down paths it shouldn't, thinking about whispering *I love you* and hearing it echoed back with depthless affection, about Tubbo with a braid tucked behind his left ear, winking shine of *Ranboo's bead* at the end, and it hurts how bad he wants it to be real, how much he wants Tubbo to love him.

*Never going to happen don't you know who you are who he is who could ever love you*, snips cruelly from somewhere, and for once, Ranboo isn't going to argue with whoever it is because *they're right*. He is not a good person, and while he's actively trying not to be a *bad person*, Ranboo knows there's no way he's ever going to be someone that's worthy of Tubbo.

Ranboo's hurt a lot of people, more than Tubbo, and he did it on *purpose* each time, no accidents no mistakes, just him and his horrible mind and the way he knows how to tear someone down to *their knees*. And he did that to *Tubbo*, just kept going and digging and

*shredding* until he was sobbing, begging Ranboo to *stop*, and now Ranboo has the audacity to stare after him and wish hopelessly to be loved.

It's disgusting, *he's disgusting*, and his head's always going to be messed up and the specters are realistically never going to leave him, he'll be haunted by past mistakes and dark thoughts the rest of his life, and that's not something anyone else should have to deal with, not something that they could easily love. Tubbo deserves a person that can make him happy, that'll appreciate how his mind thinks and see the beauty in his work, who will cherish and support him the rest of his days, and not- *whatever broken misplaced thing* that Ranboo is.

It's been a stupid fantasy from the beginning, something he's let go on for far too long, but that's Ranboo's specialty isn't it? Delusions and altered realities and parasocial relationships, constructing his own narrative to always get what he wants, but if he keeps it up, it's going to become a monster he can't control, destroy everything he and Tubbo have.

Being friends means more than any delusion ever could, so Ranboo forces himself to disentangle the two of them, stepping back from Tubbo while he shoves out everything that's begging him to just *try*, insisting that *he's wrong it's real he cares he could love you just try*, locking it away with finality and pretends his heart isn't dissolving out of his chest.

"Okay?" Tubbo murmurs, still close enough that he's pretty much all Ranboo can see, but they're not touching anymore and it's *killing him*, but he's okay, *he'll make himself be okay*, nods and says shaky but sure, "Y-Yeah, I just- y-yeah, s-sorry-"

Tubbo huffs and looks like he wants to reach out for Ranboo again, but stops- *of course he does no one wants you never have never will- just...leave me alone-* sways forwards a little with the aborted motion anyway, "You haven't done anything wrong, got it? I'm just happy you're okay."

"I'm happy you're okay too!" A bright voice chimes in with and Ranboo hides his wince, forgot they have an audience as all the other children agree heartily, peeks over Tubbo's head at the semicircle of them behind his back, some tension easing away seeing the sincerity in all their big, dark eyes.

"Hi! I'm Helianthus, but you can call me Heli!" The little girl at the front says, rich, chestnut hair bound back in two messy braids, wings snapping open as she jerks a thumb at herself, and then points out everyone else, rattling off a long list of names that Ranboo *makes sure* he saves, creates a new file for this gaggle of children under, *Important Information*.

"I'm Ranboo." He says when she's done, odd streak of pride at that being the end of it, no more fussy titles that just made him feel worse, like that was all he amounted to, a name wrote down in the ledgers and tacked on to the end of formal announcements, looks at Tubbo quick and can't fight the grin that twitches his lips up, "And I'm Tubbo's partner."

And for some reason, that sends the children into rounds of excited noises, and a few of the younger ones try and scramble forwards, but get held back by their elders, another barrage of questions thrown at him but this time it's *do you fly like Bo does* and *can I see your blaster* and *the Syndicate is so cool* and *where have you been* and *is Techno really pink?*

Ranboo doesn't even know where to start answering them, thankfully gets saved as Tubbo sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles, gets all the kids to shut up at once, and he shakes his head, shooing them off with a playful, "Don't you have places to be? Flous I *know* you're supposed to be helping your mother in the bakery, and Lalus and Marini, you're not supposed to be out of town this far. Come on, come on! Let's go back."

The rest of the walk into town is hyper chaotic, Ranboo getting at least three separate attempted lectures on their little village, Avelare, one of which includes a very detailed and winding narrative about Hedera who lost one of her hair ribbons on a walk but found it the next day under her pillow. Which, *somehow*, proves the town has a very benevolent and all powerful ribbon fairy, and if *he* wants a ribbon under his pillow, Ranboo just has to eat all his pollen cakes, and he tries not to laugh at how frantically Tubbo starts shaking his head behind Hedera's back.

Ranboo's attention is constantly pulled in a dozen directions, Torrus wants him to watch him try and do a summersault, Magnola still wants a piggyback ride, Heli won't leave off about his blaster, which, he's glad he left on the ship now, Lalus is trying to tell him about his engineering project, Marini is arguing with her brother about how her's is better, Flous keeps trying to trip him, and half a dozen others are orbiting around Tubbo doing the same things.

And it's a lot, but it's kinda nice, Ranboo decides, finds himself laughing at their antics, warmth spreading out when they grin, excited voices rising in too fast jokes that make hardly any sense, but it's clear they're trying to make him laugh again, so much affection and kind interest in a stranger that it makes his heart ache.

*These are such wonderful people*, he thinks gently, watching Tubbo scoop up a shrieking Magnola, tucking her little legs through a set of arms as he races off down the path towards town, belting out some song the children all seem to know, and he understands so much how Tubbo ended up the way he did.

This part of Apidae is all extensive rolling prairie and verdant forests, and Avelare's settled back into a huge sloping hill, draped over the land like a comfortable blanket, houses half built into the hillside with mismatched brick chimneys poking out of the earth. Brightly colored doors and hexagonal windows pepper the earth toned walls, ivy and other climbing vines wrapped around window sills, so many flowers spilling out of planter boxes and clustered in beautiful gardens, Ranboo isn't sure *he'd* even be able to memorize them all.

The children stream out ahead of them, forming some sort of honor guard as they walk down the main street, and they don't get the same unbridled exuberance from the adults, but Ranboo can still tell everyone is excited, calling out to Tubbo happily in Apian and waving arms as they pass.

Despite his flawless recall, Ranboo is really bad at learning language, struggled enough with his own mother tongue and then standard, has to try really hard to string sentences together, but he can memorize words no problem, and his ears flick when he hears one he'd know anywhere repeated over and over again as townsfolk greet Tubbo.

"Are they asking you about the Eshachi?" He asks in bewilderment when there's not really anyone to overhear, and Tubbo scrunches his nose in confusion before he bursts out into

laughter, giggling so hard it shakes his shoulders and disturbs a sleeping Magnola who finally crashed after a lot of yawning.

“Yeah I guess you wouldn’t know, um, yeah it’s Apian for like a uuuh...an affectionate insult?” Tubbo says, resettling the little girl who nods off again quickly, nuzzling her head into the back of his neck, and Tubbo looks up at Ranboo, cocky kinda shy smile on his face, “I don’t think it translates super well, but it’s like... *‘little spitfire’*...ha, no- probably closer to *‘little asskicker’*.”

*Ancients help him but it fits it fits so well-*

“And...that’s what you named your ship? After your nickname...*little asskicker?*” Ranboo asks in mounting amusement, grin unfurling across his lips as Tubbo laughs again, tipping his head back with color high on his cheeks, suddenly has the desperate urge to have known Tubbo while he was growing up, wonders how much of a tiny terror he was.

Eventually, the kids start splintering off, and Tubbo passes Magnola to Heli who waves her antenna at them as she struggles under the younger’s weight, refuses any help though and tromps off proudly down the road. “Give it a few years, they’re gonna be calling her *eshachi* too.” Tubbo snorts, bumping their shoulders together and then starts heading up this winding path set into the hill.

It’s not a huge hill, but it gives a nice vantage point for the rest of the small valley, and Ranboo pauses for a second, admiring the warm green everything is, how lush and verdant and rich the land looks. Balmy summer wind ruffles at Ranboo’s hair, nothing like the sharp, biting snap of the breeze up on Voidfall’s parapets, and he tilts his head into it, feels like gentle fingers combing through his hair.

Heights have been a problem for a while, but not up here, Ranboo’s finding, even as he edges a little further off the road, because it’s not a sheer drop, just a gentle decline, and the earth feels sturdy under his feet, comfortable heaviness in his limbs like he’s stuck in place, like he’s grounded, like he’s not going to slip over the side, and when Tubbo yells for him to hurry up, Ranboo turns away from the overlook with a smile.

From what Ranboo’s seen so far, Apidae is absolutely gorgeous, such a stark counterpart to the dark, frozen deserts of Annwyl, and he really, really likes it, all the vegetation and the sun backing molten into his skin, the colors and the quiet and the gentleness of the land itself, wonders if it would ever be possible to stay, if there’s a way he could carve out a small place for himself here.

*What a sight you’d make*, he thinks with a snort, but it’s more fond amusement at his line of thought rather than derision, inner monologue lulled by the peace here as well, *tall piece of shadow looming over all these little sunspots, don’t be stupid.*

Any calm he’s found evaporates though as Tubbo comes to a stop outside a little yellow walled house with a narrow front porch, big baskets of some orange flowering thing Ranboo doesn’t have a name for sitting besides the faded blue door, and it feels like something tickles at his neck, *this is it show time be nice be polite be normal for the honor of the Ancestors watch your damn mouth.*



“You ready?” Tubbo asks where they stand by the picket fence, which is a bit redundant because Ranboo doesn’t really have a choice now does he, he’s here and can’t exactly leave. He swallows hard to get rid of the sensation of something wrapped around his throat and nods his head, stands up a little straighter and tries to comb his hair into something sensible, but it’s too long now, falls back into his eyes almost immediately.

It never behaves like he wants it to, but he’s loath to cut it, feels vicious pride whenever he sees how long it’s gotten, knows his father would be indignant, Meleeri furious, and it’s small and stupid but it’s his little rebellion, a subconscious *fuck you* to them and that life they tried to make him live, has his shoulders settling more comfortably as they walk up the garden path.

Tubbo doesn’t bother knocking when they get to the front door, just twists the knob and walks straight in, calling out a greeting and almost instantly, there’s the sound of nails skittering sharp on the worn wooden floorboards, a blurry black and yellow shape flying out of a nearby room.

“*Benson!*” Tubbo cries in delight, tumbling to the floor as the bombini attacks him, miniature wings on its back beating erratically while it licks him relentlessly, and Tubbo slaps a hand out until he finds Ranboo, tugs at him so he’ll bend down as well, “Benson! Come say hi to Boo!”

Benson seems more than eager to launch himself at Ranboo, and he weighs more than Ranboo was expecting, knocks him on his ass as the bombini wiggles into his lap, making a strange buzzing barking sound as he personally attempts to give Ranboo a bath.

“Bo! You’re home! I- *Queens past*, Benson! You wretched thing, *stop!*” A laughing voice orders and around Benson’s pointy ears, Ranboo can see a woman dusting her hands off on an apron, curly antenna bouncing down into her eyes, hair tucked back in a long braid and framing an impish face he’d recognize anywhere as she clicks her tongue at Benson, “Get off him you silly thing, that’s not how we treat guests.”

“Ama!” Tubbo calls, scrambling up and throwing himself at his mother, and Ranboo tries not to stare as they embrace, how one set of her hands go around his back and the others come up to cup his face, both of them leaning in to brush their antenna together.

He’s knocked back into his memories hard then, finds himself sitting on the cargo ramp on Tjhia-Yuet, the hell he can never seem to escape, the one he doesn’t want to, bright outline of hands on his face as Tubbo leans in, ticklish sensation of his antenna dragging over his horns, how Ranboo eventually gave up and tried to nuzzle him back, something that didn’t really work but made him trill deep in his chest regardless.

And traitorous thing that it is, the door that glows with sunlight and hopeless dreams starts to crack open, seeing how Tubbo greets his mother, dangerous whispers telling Ranboo that *he’s special*, that Tubbo didn’t do that with Sneeg, someone he’s known longer, *someone not as horrible as him*, but that he greeted Ranboo like this *multiple* times, in the way he’ll only greet his mother.

*Doesn't mean anything overthinking fantasies and delusions and parasocial relationships you're projecting he does care but not like that never like that not family not cariad's doesn't love you-*

"Oh! Ama, come're. I want to introduce you to someone." Ranboo hears Tubbo say and his heart drops out of him, *gotta behave know how to behave don't fuck this up be good be better don't be yourself be normal*. He ducks behind Benson's wiggling ears quick and takes a deep breath before getting to his feet, pleasant mask on his face as he straightens up to his full height, heels clicked together and hands folded politely behind his back.

*Back straight chin level don't move your feet keep your claws out of sight eyes even and pleasant smile no fangs*, he hears *her* reprimand in his ears, almost sees her go striding past but gets distracted as Tubbo comes forward with his mother, waits patiently until he gives the introductions, "Ama, this is Ranboo, my partner, and Ranboo, this is my mother, Cissan."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Misses Underscore, thank you for allowing me to stay in your home." Ranboo says smoothly and mild, unlatches one hand and brings it up to his chest in a fist as he bows to her informally, realizes too late that he still has his sunglasses on and freezes straightening back up, mind shifting fast into overdrive trying to figure out how to correct the slight how to make it up to her, but he's *got nothing to offer her lost all your connections at court salary you make isn't enough to buy jewelry or expensive wines or for a bribe what are you going to do what are you going to do whAT ARE YOU-*

"It's wonderful to meet you too, Ranboo, and really, you can call me Cissan, I don't mind." She says gently, tone of voice reminding him of- *stay with me Boo not leaving you again promise* -and he glances up in trepidation, sees a heartachingly familiar smile, dimples in her cheeks too, and Ranboo unwinds, voice a little busted when he whispers, "Yes ma'am."

Misses Undersco- *Cissan*, laughs fondly, left set of arms still draped around Tubbo that she uses to drag him in with, another hand coming up to ruffle at his hair, "My, aren't you polite, so different to this one, huh?"

"Hey! I'm *plenty* polite-"

"Yeah? Then how come you haven't offered to get our guest's bag, hmm?" Cissan needles playfully, has Tubbo stuck in something that looks more like a headlock as she rakes his hair down into his eyes, ignores his whining protests and clicks her tongue, "How can you even see anything with all of this? Do they not have scissors at the Syndicate? Do I need to send you some?"

"Queens past, *ama stop-!*" Tubbo laughs, finally ducking out of her hold and shakes his hair out of his eyes, points an accusing finger at Ranboo and says, "Get onto him! His hair is *way* longer!"

Ranboo looks at her quickly in alarm, suddenly glad for his sunglasses so no one can see the way his eyes go wide in panic, and he forces himself still as Cissan's gaze flicks to him, heart thundering loud in his ears, terrified over what she's going to say, how her face will contort in knowing scorn, mouth opening to say *you're right what a disgrace what a failure can't even keep up his appearance reflects badly on his family a mista-*

“Ranboo looks distinguished, you just look like a ragamuffin.” Cissan declares loftily, one set of hands braced on her hips and the others folded across her chest while she nods decisively, Tubbo sputtering in the background, “This is *blatant* favoritism and he’s only *been here six minutes-!*”

“And yet you *still* haven’t taken his bag!” Cissan turns away from Ranboo to better fuss at Tubbo, and with no one looking at him, Ranboo lets his posture droop in exhaustion, anxieties rolling under his skin and making his hands shake, but he forces them still when Tubbo turns to him in exasperation.

“*Okay! Fine! Queens past-* Boo give me your stupid bag.” Tubbo bitches halfheartedly, one hand held out in his direction, and Ranboo only waffles for a minute, scared of being seen as entitled, but Cissan *specifically* wants Tubbo to do this, and he doesn’t want to *offend her*, and that’s what wins out as he slides his duffle off his shoulder and hands it over.

Tubbo takes it without further complaint, but does roll his eyes at the snarky grin his mother is giving him, nods his head down a hallway, “Alright well if you’re done *harassing me*, I think we’re probably going to go nap or something, flight was long.”

Grin melting into something more fond, Cissan steps up and touches him lightly on the face, antenna twitching out to brush at Tubbo’s briefly, “I’m *never* done harassing you, but go get some rest melli, amote.”

“Etiam amote.” Tubbo says softly, Apian flowing smooth and warm out of his mouth, and before today, Ranboo hasn’t really heard him speak it much, but he’s really liked hearing it, something about the language gentle and kind and nothing like the sharp clicks and warping echoes of Enderian. Stacking up the comparisons between here and Annwyl only serves to make Ranboo feel more out of place, and he shakily waves by to Cissan, follows after Tubbo and slides his sunglasses up into his hair, claws picking distractedly at his bracelet.

*He said it was okay that you’re here that he wanted you to come she told you to call her by her given name that it was wonderful to meet you,* Ranboo reminds himself as Tubbo opens what has to be his bedroom door, and Ranboo hesitates at the threshold, *remember you are not your family*, before cautiously stepping into the room, quickly scans the small space.

*Only one door in window too small for you to get out or for anyone else to get in bases covered then,* eyes flicking then to décor and the things scattered about, *cluttered but clean no one really lives here anymore but it was once well lived in,* blinks at the colorful hammock strung up between two sturdy beams, *huh interesting personal choice or cultural difference haven’t slept in something like that before wonder what it’s like impolite to ask keep your mouth shut.*

“Well, this is you I guess.” Tubbo says from the other side of his bedroom, dumping Ranboo’s duffle down on a pallet spread out on the floor, patchwork quilts folded on top, an entire array of pillows mounded on it that has Ranboo’s tail wagging once in excitement, “Sorry, we don’t really have the space for a spare hammock.”

*Cultural difference then wonder where it came from,* Ranboo notes down enthusiastically, mind already working to fit what he knows together, trying to come up with a feasible

hypothesis, and he turns to start asking Tubbo questions, but see the way his eyes droop and smiles softly, *later then he's dead tired must be like at HQ now that he's here he's about to drop.*

"I'll be fine, thank you though." Ranboo tells him gently, shuffles forward, mindful of not clipping his horns- *horn* on any low hanging beams and reaches out, slides Tubbo's duffle strap off his shoulder, nudging him in the direction of his hammock, "Go get some sleep, Bo."

"M'kay." He says around a yawn, fist scrubbing into an eye as he tumbles into the hammock, still with his jacket and boots on. *Why does he always do this takes two minutes,* Ranboo huffs affectionately, and starts unlacing his shoes, tugs them and his socks off, and for lack of a better spot, leaves them lined up neatly by the door.

Tubbo doesn't stir through the whole process, is asleep with his legs hanging over the side, and Ranboo grabs them around his knees, slings them into the hammock and snorts as it sways back and forth wildly, Tubbo cuddled up in the center hugging a pillow.

"Dork." Ranboo mutters lovingly, kicks his own boots off as he flops down on the pallet, happily worming into the mound of pillows and blankets, sighs because this is a lot nicer than his bunk at HQ. He fishes his holo-tablet out of his duffle, finds the book on Homiulo he's been reading and settles in for what'll probably be a good hour or so, gets lost learning about seas of glittering liquid metals and living beings that look like rock formations.

*-widely considered to be one of the rarest instances of geo-biological beings in the galaxy, Homiulo and its unique fauna have become a recent interest by many intrepid explorers and sightseers. As of now, there are no known sentient life forms on the planet, but further research must be done, taking into account how many biologists have had to redefine what is considered 'organic life' after discovering the planet-*

At some point, Ranboo hears a faint snuffling noise, and he immediately snaps out of his reading, waits a breath but when it comes again, a little louder, a little more *distressed*, he gets to his feet quietly, pads across the floor. Tubbo never really moves around a lot in his sleep, but when Ranboo peeks into the hammock, sees the pinched set to his brows, how his eyes flicker behind his eyelids, he quickly slides a hand across one of his arms.

It usually works at calming Tubbo fairly easily, but he's still got his jacket on, must not be able to really feel Ranboo's fingers, and he whimpers in his sleep, chest heaving like he's in pain, and Ranboo panics, touches him gently on the cheek. He runs his fingertips in careful sweeps under Tubbo's eye, across his cheekbone and into the hair at the nape of his neck, scratches lightly and sighs when Tubbo unwinds, expression smoothing out again.

Ranboo goes to move his hand away, mindful of not violating any boundaries, but then Tubbo whispers out something in his sleep, and Ranboo freezes where he is, pulse rocketing up and almost making him pass out, hearing Tubbo mumble, "*Boo...my Boo...*"

His hand tremors, fighting the urge to cradle the back of Tubbo's head, run his thumb along his cheek, needs to pull away *has to pull away can't pull away-* and Tubbo unconsciously

makes that choice for him, wiggling back so Ranboo's fingers are splayed out through his hair, exhales like he's never been more content.

*"Ancients I love you so much sunshine."* Ranboo whispers hoarsely in Enderian, isn't strong enough to stop himself carding careful claws through Tubbo's messy curls, throat burning hot with emotions as he all but begs, *"Wish you could love me as much as I love you...you're it for me Bo, you've always been it."*

And it's wrong and he should stop, but Ranboo has always been weak, stays leaned up against a beam and pets through Tubbo's hair while he naps, knows with sinking despair that this memory is going up there along with those nights on Tjhia-Yuet, but just for now, he can convince himself it's okay to pretend like he's loved.

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### **Lesson Eleven: You will never matter if you can't prove your worth**

"-which in the year two thousand and s-seventy-"

Explosive rap against the desk and he flinches instinctually, claws curling into his palms because that means another five repetitions, takes a deep breath as she orders, "Again!"

"The Gilded Alliance was a multitiered treaty and trade negotiation pact between Emperor Jiron Kiezodius First of His Name, The Great Unifier, The Eighty Fifth Sun King, Sixth Emperor of Nirox-" Ranboo has to take a sip of air after that, back ramrod straight and starting to hurt from staying so still, toes flexing in his boots out of discomfort, "-and King Zeephir Second of His Name, All Father, Bridge Builder, Ruler of the End and All Things Beyond."

Flash of indigo as she passes by, hands tucked neatly behind her back, claws draped loosely over the riding crop, but it stays still and Ranboo relaxes for a second, *good you're doing good just keep going*, wets his lips and begins the next line, "Signed and ratified on stardate sixty of the Imperial year two thousand and twenty two, the treaty would bring Voidfall, and the Ender, into the empire proper as citizens of class and distinction."

"The ensuing benefits from this decision were far reaching and impactful, improving the lives of not only all those here on Annwyl, but also those out in the greater empire-" He says a little more confidently, tipping his chin up in pride because he's been doing better, his voice steadier recently, but then his head suddenly swims and he stumbles on, "-ushering in a new area of peace and p-prosper-"

The word hasn't even fully left his mouth before the crack of the riding crop striking a wooden surface rings out, and Ranboo doesn't flinch this time, stays still despite how his vision wavers and he begins to despair as Meleeri barks, "Again!"

Ranboo grits his teeth and takes a shaky breath, internal clock telling him it's been *three hours now*, and he's so tired, wishes he was allowed to roll his aching shoulders as he begins again, "The Gilded Alliance was a multitiered treaty and trade negotiation pact between Emperor Jiron K-Kiezo-"

Sharp crack behind him, *keep yourself still don't move a muscle nothing allowed to show through*, so much steel and fire in her voice as she demands, "Again!"

"The Gilded Alliance was a multitiered treaty and trade negotiation pact between Emperor Jiron Kiezodius First of His Name, The Great Unifier, The Eighty Sixth Sun King-"

*Crack what's wrong with you-* "Eighty Fifth, get it right this time, now again!"

"The Gilded Alliance w-was a-"

*CraCK why can't you pay attention-* "Again!"

"T-The Gilded A-Alliance wa-was-"

*CRACK why can't you listen-* "Again!"

"The Gi-Gilded um, u-um, w-was a-a-a A-Alliance t-that w-was- was was- w-w-w-"

*C R A C K why can't you learn incompetent unfortunate a disgrace-* "Again!"

"-was a-a-a multi- m-multi- tiered t-t-treaty that um, that, uh, that that t-that-"

*-stupid useless little shadow if you left no one would miss you good riddance-*

"ENOUGH!" Meleeri roars and Ranboo clicks his mouth shut immediately, cowering into his shoulders as she goes storming past, everything about her so eerily still and unnatural, no emotion in her face or body or voice, like she's carved from the same black stone as the palace, unrelenting and unforgiving and *cold*.

"M'sorry." Ranboo mumbles, ducking his head to stare at his feet, hands clenched painfully at his sides, infuriated with himself that he can't say *one* passage clearly, stupid tongue keeps tripping him and getting caught on words. He stops breathing when there's the chilly smooth press of the crop under his jaw, goes boneless and lets his head be tipped back, forced to meet Meleeri's searing green eyes.

"A prince does not mumble." She orders, glaring down the length of her nose at him, and Ranboo fights the urge to shrink back, cowering under her in the hopes that she'll loosen up- *she never does*, "Nor does he apologize. Do I make myself clear, your highness?"

She always calls him by his proper title, gives him all the respect he deserves as a prince, but for some reason, Ranboo can never shake the feeling that it's not praise, that it's out of contempt, swallows hard and blessedly says even, "Yes ma'am."

"Good. Now begin from the top again, and do not falter, it's unbecoming for someone of your station." Meleeri says, pulling back and tucking her crop behind her, resumes pacing around him, swatting at his hunched back until he straightens his creaking joints out, squares his aching shoulders, and Ranboo takes a deep breath to begin, "The Gilded A-Alliance-"

He wants to cry hearing the crop slam down into a desk, rattling the contents inside, bites his lip hard to get himself back under control as Meleeri says, "This is not even a hard passage,

your highness, and yet you persist in this *stuttering*. ”

“I-I’m trying!” Ranboo cries, tail snapping to coil around his leg when she whirls in front of him, eyebrows up to her hairline at him speaking without being addressed, and Ranboo figures he’s already in hot water, can’t make it worse to ask, “C-Could we resume in the morning? I-I’m so tired governess, a-and I think that-”

“I *do not care* what you think. You are not dismissed until your lesson is complete, do you understand?” Meleeri says, stalking up to him with narrowed green eyes, looming over him like everyone always does, forces Ranboo to hunch into himself trying *to get away*, “Do you think you deserve special treatment? Is that it? All of your siblings completed their lessons without a problem, but it is only you that struggles so.”

Ranboo winces, has to break eye contact because he *knows okay*, he knows he’s the worst out of all of them, the youngest the weakest the *dumbest*, can’t do half the things they can, can’t speak evenly struggles to organize his thoughts. He’s a *disappointment*, he knows he is, knows that’s why father won’t see him as much and works to remember who he is, why the other’s pick on him sometimes, and Ranboo wilts under Meleeri’s glare, under the pressure, flinches when she clicks her tongue.

“You are almost eleven, you are too old to be behaving like this. In less than four years, you will be making your debut at court, and what will everyone say, what will they *think*, hearing a *prince* talk like you do?” Meleeri chides, and she’s always been his harshest critic, the one with the toughest standards, and Ranboo just wants to make her proud, *wants to make them all proud*, that’s all he’s ever wanted, “Your performance and actions speak directly on behalf of your family, and you do them *a disservice* by acting like you do. You will complete the lesson in its entirety, do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ranboo whispers, claws biting into his palms until it *hurts*, cool trickle pricking under them, but it keeps his back straight and his mouth shut until Meleeri steps away, stays in front of him this time as she orders, “Good, now begin.”

And he sucks in a chattering inhale, images closing a door against *everything, all of the pressure and the fears the disappointment in father’s gaze the nightmare of it being in mama’s Reshaa’s flawless speech and slitted green eyes her pointy nails digging into his collar as she points at his reflection something not right with you and everyone can see it little brother*, shuts it all away and starts, “The Gilded Alliance was a multitiered treaty and trade negotiation pact-”

Ranboo isn’t allowed to go to bed for another hour, but he gets through the whole passage.

Meleeri nods her head in approval as he’s being escorted to his rooms by the guards, and Ranboo wants so desperately to feel *something*, but he doesn’t, stumbles out of the study like he’s already asleep, dead to the world, blank nothingness dripping down from his chest like sand slipping off the parapets, and he hunches into himself the next morning when he wakes up and it’s still there.

--

Ranboo slips quietly out of the bedroom, bare feet soundless on the wooden floorboards as he eases the door shut behind him, has years of practice at it, knows exactly how much force to use and which way to turn the knob for it to close silently. Tubbo's still knocked out, should be up soon given his general sleeping habits, and Ranboo would've been more than happy carding through his hair until then, but he can tell he's getting dehydrated.

Higher temperatures always make his body process liquids faster, burning through what he has in a fraction of the time as it would on Annwyl, leaving him susceptible to heat exhaustion and heat stroke, and after his experience on that sandy shithole, Ranboo's been hyper aware of making sure he has enough fluids ever since.

He steps softly down the hallway, late afternoon sunlight streaming in through the open doorways where the rooms brush against the outside, but the rest of the house is underground and pleasantly dark, feels like a nice balm against his itchy eyes. Unfortunately the ceilings are low, but that's to be expected, sturdy wooden beams criss-crossing over his head and supporting the sloped roof, more beams framing the walls with what looks like earthen plaster in between.

It's very countryside, very *humble*, and a part of his mind wrinkles its nose at the hand hewn furniture, the quaint decorations and simple materials, but as soon as Ranboo has the thought, he immediately feels like shit, sinks his claws into his bracelet.

*Fucks wrong with you this is their home and its perfectly lovely its clean and well taken care of you're just spoiled and entitled*, Ranboo berates himself miserably, hanging his head, doesn't know why he's still like this, thought he'd be better by now. He'd honestly take whatever he could get, just- some *small* confirmation that he *is* getting better, that it's not always going to be like this, that he's going to be able to change.

That's what has been scaring Ranboo the most, the fear that this is all there is, that whatever Tubbo sees in him is a lie, and that at his core, this is it, who he really is. *Corrupted fruit and everything after all*, he sighs, lip pulling back in a snarl, rocks his head to the side and catches a section of the hallway that's decorated in mismatched frames.

Ranboo takes a half step closer despite himself, snarl twitching up into more of an honest smile, seeing a grainy picture of what has to be Tubbo as a child, standing in between Cissan and his father, band aids slapped across his face as he holds up some ribbon triumphantly. Moving slowly down the line, Ranboo goes through each one, fondness burning bright in his chest at catching a glimpse into Tubbo's childhood, smiling at images of him hanging upside down from trees and clustered with a dozen other children, gap toothed grins that begin to fill in but never lose the dimples to either side.

There's one near the end he pauses at for a long time, looks more recent, likely taken in the last year or so, Tubbo sitting at a table with a huge crowd of people around him that all have the same mischievous smiles and dark hair, messily iced cake in front of him with a score of candles in it, dorky looking party hat caught between his antenna, but he's grinning wide at the camera, may or may not be subtly flipping it off, and Ranboo's heart lurches.

*Ancients how do I keep finding ways to love him more*, he thinks despairingly, has to physically stop himself from reaching out and stroking adoring fingers across the glass of the



picture frame, mutters in no way serious at the smirking image, “Fuck you, dickhead.”

“He gets that a lot actually.”

And Ranboo nearly jumps out of his skin, bangs his head hard on the rafters and falls back with a squawk, groans as he rubs the sore spot at the top of his forehead and squints at where Cissan has scrambled out of her chair, rushed off further into the kitchen, and wants nothing more than to sink down into the floor and never come back up.

*Fuck shit hell Ancients of the fucking cursed Deep, what's wrong with you look like an idiot look insane why'd you react like that what's she gonna think fuck head hurts ugh you're such a moron-*

Cissan comes darting out into the hallway a second later with a towel wrapped bundle in her lower set of hands, drops down next to him in a puddle of skirts and hands the parcel to him, “Oh, so sorry, melli. Didn't think I'd spook you that bad, how's your head? You okay?”

Not wanting to be ungrateful, Ranboo takes the towel and feels a lukewarm heft to it, could barely be considered chilly, and figures she's gotten something out of the freezer for him to reduce the swelling, presses it to his forehead and winces at the sting from the condensation against his skin.

“Oh, I'm so sorry, is it that bad? I-” Cissan starts again, and Ranboo doesn't want to make her feel worse, interrupts gently to try and assuage her concerns, “No, no! I-I'm okay! Sorry, shouldn't have overreacted, that's on me really. I just hope I didn't damage anything.”

“Ah, if anyone's breaking something 'round here with their thick skull, it's Bo, not you, melli.” Cissan tells him with a laugh, reaches out carefully and pats him on the shoulder, smiles when Ranboo turns to look at her, “Well, let me make you some tea at least, always good for soothing aches and pains.”

*Shit*, how is Ranboo supposed to get out of this without offending her.

What little moisture is collecting from the towel is already burning his skin, so whatever the PH of the water here is, he's for sure not going to be able to drink it...but turning down her kind overture will be seen as rude and snobbish, and Ranboo *can't do that*, but he's also not an *idiot*, doesn't want to tear his stomach lining open.

Fuck, he's in a bind and Cissan is starting to look at him weird, awkwardly retracting her hand so he's got to say *something*, swallows past the panic rattling around in his throat and remembers Tubbo looking at him in the Eshachi, *you're not your family you're not your family*, clutches it to his chest like a shield as he tries to evenly say, “I-I- thank you, um, t-thank you very much but uh, b-but while your offer is greatly a-appreciated, I-I don't think I can um- c-can drink any of the water here- *safely*, I-I mean.”

*Disgrace can't even get one sentence out waste of my time waste of everyone's unteachable can't learn a lost cause*, she tells him in her cold cold voice, like the wailing of the wind up on Voidfall's parapets, and Ranboo refuses to look at her, but he can see her looming behind Cissan, riding crop in hand and dark purple of her dress flowing to the floor, *you're a*

*miserable excuse for a prince and a black mark on the ledger for your entire family, do you know that?*

*I do*, Ranboo whispers dejectedly, feels like he's sitting back in the study, a lot smaller than he is now but made even smaller by her nasty eyes and sharp tongue, blinks in confusion then when he hears warm and kind and gentle, "I know, but I have some with a lower PH. Three point five, right? That's what Tubbo told me to get at least so blame him if it's wrong."

*Wait...what- not a problem not offended not upset but you refused you stuttered you're a mess went out of their way for you know things about you whoever pays attention to you he does he always has love him-*

"I-It's right." Ranboo murmurs quietly, staring at her with wide eyes, and Cissan smiles at him, dimples in her cheeks while she offers a hand out to help him up, nothing behind her but the sunny little kitchen as she says, "Good then! Now do you like fruit teas or leaf teas better?"

Ranboo gets directed to the long table that runs the length of the whole kitchen, pulls a chair out quietly and sits down, sets his soggy towel bundle off to the side before he accidentally gives himself chemical burns and quickly glances around the room. There's a wood-burning oven Cissan strings a kettle out over, soot stained tile backsplash decorated in blue and yellow geometric designs, pots and pans neatly hung up to either side along with ropes of dried herbs, rest of the space filled with cabinets and cupboards, rusted out icebox wheezing in the corner.

It feels cozy, the space crowded and cluttered with things, nothing like the soaring ceilings and wide open spaces of Voidfall, where it felt like Ranboo was always one misstep away from going sailing off into empty air. He doesn't feel like that here, thinks he'd be able to hook an arm around something if he started drifting away, the close, choked feeling of everything wrapping around him like a hug, like fire bright arms and tickling antenna and words whispered only for his ears.

Flexing his toes against the worn floorboards, Ranboo doesn't really know what to call the warm, heavy feeling pinning his limbs down, gentle buzzing in his head lulled into something almost hypnotic, like he could curl up right here and take a nap and everything would be okay.

"So, Bo tells me you're an excellent marksman." Cissan says over her shoulder while she's getting mugs down, and Ranboo shrugs even though she can't see him, awkwardly skitters his eyes to the side and bites back the urge to argue that he's not, still a little jumpy whenever anyone compliments him, "I'm decent I suppose, I still have a lot I need to get better at."

"I understand that, but you'll get there melli. Bo crashed the first few times he flew and now look at'im, can't tear him from his ship." Cissan laughs, clinking ceramic together as she adds a generous amount of honey to her mug, about to do the same to his and pauses at the last minute, "Oh, do you like sweeteners in your tea? Sorry, habit."

"Yes please." Ranboo says softly, hands twisted up together in his lap, fingers nervously picking at one another, not sure what the protocol is on if he can ask questions or not, but he

really *really* wants to, watches her back in trepidation trying to work up the courage.

*It's okay it's not like there you're fine you're an adult you can do this just breathe and open your mouth,* but it's so hard to get words out, at least until Cissan turns around, mugs in hand, and it feels like something loosens in Ranboo's chest, seeing her eyes flit to his, "Um- T-Tubbo really crashed? W-When he was younger?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, all the time." She sighs fondly, settling down at the table across from him and slides across a pale green mug with bright yellow flowers, "I knew how much he wanted to be a pilot, but Queens past, that boy really sent me through the wringer. I don't know how many times he took the crop duster down before he finally got the hang of it."

Ranboo gets a really clear mental image then, young Tubbo with band aids stuck all over him from previous crashes standing in front of the wrecked ship and vehemently arguing that it wasn't his fault, and Ranboo huffs out a laugh, blowing gently on his tea to cool it, "He sounds like he was a handful."

"Oh you have no idea, and I have four of them!" Cissan jokes, waving her upper set of hands around and Ranboo chokes on his sip of tea, only thing stopping him from spitting it out years of table manner etiquette training. He swallows his burning mouthful and sputters out an unrestrained laugh, chest hurting from the mixed abuse of almost choking and the rough laughter.

Sitting with Cissan turns out to be really easy, almost scarily so, because so many of her mannerisms and patterns of speech are just like her son, and Ranboo finds himself relaxing quickly, almost too much, has to bite back snarky comments and snippy insults pretty frequently. He drinks his tea and listens to her stories, asking questions here and there, warmth blooming to life in his veins when she answers him every time, never gives short responses either, always makes sure to fully explain everything.

"Oooh, so the use of hammocks, or strung cloth bedding, is just a holdover from pre-agricultural times, when hunting- er, I guess just gathering was the main source of providing sustenance." Ranboo says, wiggling a little in his seat, ears perked up in interest, "Huh, yeah that makes a lot of sense. Especially considering what you were saying, about how early Mellifera usually took up residence in densely forested areas to avoid predators...*wait-* so why the transition from arboreal living to subterranean, is it-?"

"Queens, m'you're such a dork." Mumbles from the doorway to the kitchen, and Ranboo swings fast in that direction, tail flicking behind him as he mock glares at a sleep rumpled Tubbo, braces a hand on his chest and declares haughty, "Oh, *I'm* the dork? Well excuse me for actually trying to expand my knowledge base, but then again, what can I expect from a person that crashed their crop duster *four times*."

"Amaaaa." Tubbo whines, shuffling into the kitchen with his head tipped back in despair, and instead of going around to her side of the table, he drops heavily into the chair next to Ranboo, accidentally knocks their knees together, "Why'da ya tell'im thaaaaat?"

"Because it's funny." Cissan says unrepentant, takes a very elegant sip of her tea and generally acts apathetic to where Tubbo is whining incoherently about abuse, "And maybe, if

you hadn't crashed our duster *four times*, this wouldn't be happening."

"I fixed it!" Tubbo defends, sitting up a little straighter, and in the process, presses his leg against Ranboo's under the table. At the feeling of warm body heat leaching into him, Ranboo's eyes slit half lidded automatically and he presses back for a second, reveling in how Tubbo seems to do the same, but then he remembers where he is, who he is, what they're *not*, and jerks away like he's been burned.

*Come on get it together he doesn't love you isn't going to you're not cariad's can't do things like this*, Ranboo busies himself with the last of his tea, can't look over at Tubbo even though he sees him glance his way out of the corner of his eye, heart tripping a bit over *what's that look for maybe he wants no way not possible but maybe maybe it could be but it's not no one's ever going to love you, you're insane for starters and a failure after that, don't need to keep that bead since you're never going to have someone*.

Ranboo's claws clink against his mug as all the hair raises on the back of his neck, *vividly* feels like she's standing behind him, sharp bite of her nails needling at his shoulder, *give it over little brother and it will all stop, don't you want it to be over, know how you look out windows off ledges, it'll all be over if you just. Give. In.*

*No it won't you're lying that's all you do*, Ranboo snaps back at her, thumb running careful shapes over the sunny flowers on his mug, counting the petals that frame their dark centers, tries to ignore it when she simpers, *if that's the case then we're the same, little brother*, and his heart *constricts*.

*How does it feel*, she whispers, leaning down close to his ear, cloying, overwhelming scent of her perfume everywhere, *knowing we're just alike*, and Ranboo can't stop his body from twitching when he *feels* the long, silky strands of her hair tickling at the shell of his ear, *knowing that you grew up to be me*, breath catching short in his lungs because she's wrong, she's wrong she's wrong she's wrong, but- *you know I'm not, stop lying to yourself, Ranb-*

There's something warm touching his leg, an...ankle hooking around his, dragging him closer, and it's *you are not your family and glad you came and Boo my Boo* and Ranboo blinks back to himself, to the worn kitchen table and the mug with the little yellow flowers he likes, soft conversation carrying on around him.

His hands shake as he tucks them out of sight, right one worrying at the bracelet around his left, takes a few deep, even breathes like he was taught, so that it's not obvious how fast his heart is going, methodically goes through and closes the doors in his head that had creaked open while he was...gone.

And when Ranboo feels like he has a handle on himself again, he goes to untangle he and Tubbo's legs, but Tubbo only worms closer, keeps moving his foot back around Ranboo's in a test of wills that eventually leads to them kicking at each other, something that's super obvious but that Cissan ignores with well practiced ease.

"Bo, you know if you wanna make it for any of the games, you should head out soon. It's almost six." Cissan says mildly over Tubbo muttering furious curses as Ranboo pins his left leg up against the top of the table, turns to his mother and lets his leg go slack, the sudden

lack of pressure making Ranboo smash his knee into the table, “Oh shit, really? *Boooo*, how long did you let me sleep for? Why didn’t you wake me up!”

Ranboo’s rubbing at his abused knee when Tubbo flips to glare at him plaintively, looking very indignant and scandalized, like it isn’t the worst ordeal in the world trying to get him up out of bed, and Ranboo’s eyes narrow because the *audacity of this idiot*, huffs, “You ever try waking yourself up? I could throw a *brick* at you and you’d sleep through it.”

“What!” Tubbo cries, completely drowned out by Cissan’s cackling, and she hunches over the table, arm braced against it to keep her upright as she wheezes, “Oooh melli, I *like* him! Why haven’t you brought him around sooner?”

“Probably because he was afraid of getting roasted to death.” Ranboo says automatically, forgot for a second he’s talking to Tubbo’s *mother*, but before he can apologize profusely, Cissan laughs again, grins at him sharp and well meaning, “It’s what he gets for crashing my duster all those times.”

“I regret everything.” Tubbo mutters, halfway slid down in his chair, looking silly and grumpy with his antenna twitched flat out to the side in irritation, and Ranboo can’t help giggling at him, leans over and whispers conspiratorially, “Ya’know...if you hadn’t crashed the duster-”

“I am *leaving*! Fuck the both of you!” Tubbo pushes back from the table dramatically but doesn’t get up, sits there and rolls his eyes as Cissan and Ranboo laugh at his expense, Ranboo’s laughter tapering off a little when she holds out a hand to him, wiggles it to get her point across, and he very carefully high fives their palms together, smiles hesitantly at her when she grins at him.

They all get up from the table at the same time, Cissan assuring him it’s fine that she does the dishes since ya’know, *safety hazard* and everything, tells him and Tubbo to go get ready while she’s cleaning up. Tubbo disappears into his room, leaving Ranboo alone out in the hallway, not really sure what he’s supposed to be *doing* to get ready.

He fiddles with his hair in a hallway mirror, but it flies every which way, and he stops with a sigh, darting his eyes away before he can really register the stump sticking out of the top of his head. Raking a nervous hand through his hair, Ranboo lets it fall back and partially cover his right eye, hates that it had to be his right horn they snapped off.

Glancing back at his reflection then, *mismatched eyes wispy scars on your neck only one proper horn left*, and Ranboo feels his lips pull up in an unpleasant snarl, baring his fangs at the ugly image, nasty red eye on the left and shorn stump on the right, neither side looking properly Ender anymore.

*Fitting I guess the outsides match the insides*, he thinks despairingly, turning his back on the sight, feels something damp nose at his fingers and looks down in confusion until he sees Benson standing there, fluffy butt wiggling fast. “You like seeing me though, hmm?” Ranboo coos, crouching down to better scratch between his fuzzy ears, gets a long swipe of a black tongue against his face for his efforts, “I’ll take that as a yes...and thanks, not many people do, ya’know?”

Benson tips his head to the side, yellow markings on his pointed face making it look like he has little eyebrows, and Ranboo pretends they're drawn down in understanding, brushes his hand along the bombini's soft coat, "I kinda suck, Benson...but you like me anyway, right?"

It's sort of depressing, but he takes it as an affirmation when Benson just wiggles harder, squirming past Ranboo's hand and in between his legs, nearly takes him over again trying to get closer, and he laughs softly, clears his throat which had gone a little rough and gets to his feet with one last pet on Benson's head, "Thanks."

A door creaks open behind him, and Ranboo turns around to see Tubbo coming out of his room, now in a loose fitting, airy looking linen shirt with rich embroidery around the high neckline, dark red pants cinched just under his knees with more stitched detail around the cuffs, small pompoms hanging off on ties, and when he looks up, at Ranboo, his eyebrows draw down.

*Storm on the horizon*

"Dude, you're not seriously going to wear long pants." Tubbo says, fiddling with the buttons on one of his shirt sleeves, and Ranboo shrugs, picks self consciously at his bomber, "It's not like I have anything else."

"Wha- I *told* you before we left it was gonna be like, *thirty two degrees*. Why didn't you pack shorts?" Tubbo bitches, rapping a bare foot into the floor, and just thinking about himself in *shorts* has Ranboo's lips pulling back in a grimace, tail snapping behind him indignantly, "I don't *own* shorts. They're completely undignified."

"Queens of *fucking* ages past- *Ranboo*. You're an *endothermic* species from a *frozen planet*, you're going to get fucking heat stroke again if you don't-"

"I had something to drink earlier I'll be fine-"

"That's not-! NO! *How is that going to help a few hours from now?* Just- borrow something of mine-"

"*No!* I'm not wearing shorts! They look stupid-!"

"Ranboo I swear to the *Queens* if you don't-!"

"How 'bout a skirt?"

Ranboo spins around with his mouth still open, clicks it shut seeing Cissan leaning against the wall with an indulgent smile on her face, arms folded across her chest, is about to tell her he's *really* going to be fine when he hears Tubbo scoff like he *knows* Ranboo's going to refuse, and then all bets are off.

"That would be lovely, thank you Cissan." He says as politely as he can out of spite, follows after her with his tail swishing in victory listening to how Tubbo sputters behind him, realizes maybe he didn't really think this through well enough when Cissan starts pulling clothes out of her wardrobe.

Somehow, it didn't occur to Ranboo that he would be *borrowing her personal things*, suddenly feels very guilty perched awkwardly in the doorway to her bedroom, claws sinking into his bracelet because the pressure is mounting, mind working itself into snarls showing him all the ways he could damage or ruin her possessions.

*What were you thinking acting like you belong here like you're familiar enough to request these kinds of favors she was probably just offering out of principle but now you've gone and accepted like an entitled self absorbed elitist spoiled brat imperial dog sympathizer-*

"Well, they might be a little short on you, crurito, but they should fit." Cissan says, laying another option out on her bed, lower set of hands brushing wrinkles out of the sky blue material, turns to look at his frozen form in the doorway and smiles kindly, "So...have a favorite color?"

He can answer that, he knows the answer to that, *he can be good he can behave knows how to act*, hoarsely says, "Yellow."

"Ah! This one then." Cissan calls triumphantly, holding up a rich, almost golden colored skirt, thick band of embroidery at the border, interlocking hexagons and other geometric shapes, long stalked, drooping white flowers rising up from the bottom, bees stitched here and there on the soft looking fabric.

It's beautiful, and Ranboo stalls reaching out for it automatically, fingers curling back into his palm as his ears flatten, *too eager too obvious can't let them know what you're feeling entitled*, quickly drops his arm and forces his voice even as he says, "I- I can't thank you enough for the offer, but I don't want to impose or-"

"It's not an imposition, crurito. Here." Cissan tells him kindly, moving across the room since Ranboo refuses to enter, gently forces the skirt into his slack hands, only let's go when he curls cautious fingers around the material, "I promise, it's no dust off my wings, but it's not going to upset me if you changed your mind either. I just want you to be comfortable."

"Thank you..." Ranboo murmurs thickly, *has* to break eye contact with her because it's too much, having her wide open honest gaze on him, and he tips his head to the side so his bangs cover his face, starts backing out of her room, "I-I'm um, I-I'm gonna go c-change..."

He ducks into Tubbo's empty room and closes the door with his back, setting sun throwing golden shafts of light through the window, tinting everything warm where it touches, like liquid gold spilling through the air. Now that he's alone, Ranboo can let his body shiver like it wants, nerves and anxieties pouring off him, but after a few seconds it stops, and he can relax out of his rigid posture.

Taking a deep breath, he relishes how it expands his chest out, seems like it's smothering the unpleasant feelings that still squirm around his ribs, *you're not your family glad you're here not an imposition*, lets it go and feels better. Ranboo steps out of his cargo pants and kicks them in the direction of his stuff, slides the skirt on, hem of it settling just past his knees where it's probably floor length for Cissan, and the temperature difference *is* immediate.

And Ranboo has to give Tubbo this one, already feels way more comfortable with nothing pressed super close to his skin and trapping excess heat, swishes the material back and forth, intrigued with the way it moves and spins in an experimental circle. The skirt flares out around him easily, fabric swirling past like a pinwheel, and that's fun, *he likes that*, and Ranboo grins, does it once more for the hell of it.

Before he leaves, he shrugs off his bomber and tosses it on the palette, tucking his t-shirt into the high waistband of the skirt, spares a glance down at himself, lovely golden fabric and tiny bees and snowy flowers catching at his knees, and doesn't think he looks half bad for once, runs a thumb under his bracelet so it sits a little more comfortably around his wrist and heads out the door.

Tubbo's waiting for him across the hall, slouched back against the wall with his lower set of hands tapping around at his handheld, thumb of an upper one snagged between his teeth, looks up when he hears the door open and grins, nodding his head in approval, "Better. Ya'know, yellow looks good on you."

"I know." Ranboo sniffs, tipping his head back as he strides past, just for the way Tubbo will laugh, loud peals of it worming under his skin and settling warm against his bones like pulsating embers, like the gentle curl of solar flares out in space.

It's still light outside when they step onto the front porch, Tubbo telling him the sun's not going to really set until much later, closer to ten he says, and Ranboo's ears bob in excitement, not used to the sun staying in the sky that long. Annwyl's local sun Golaull is always just the barest light on the horizon, nothing like the bright shine of Kisen overhead, beating down hot on the back of his neck as they descend the hill into town.

As they're passing vibrant gardens along the road, Ranboo sees a cluster of cheery yellow flowers standing tall in someone's yard, recognizes them as the same kind that were painted on his mug earlier, and has to stop to ogle at them, didn't realize how *big* they were, most of the sturdy green stalks about the same height as *him*.

"What're these called?" He asks Tubbo before he can get too far, and he turns around immediately, working his way back to Ranboo and hums in understanding, "Oh, those are called helilanth er- *sunflowers*, I think, in standard."

"Sunflower." Ranboo repeats diligently, leaning forward to see if they have a sweet smell, and they don't really, but they're still pretty, and he takes a quick step back so he doesn't accidentally touch one, wary of whoever's yard this is, knows how to mind his manners, and gapes when Tubbo asks, "Do you want one?"

"W-What! N-No, I-I mean, it's um, i-it's not polite, I don't know who's it is..." Ranboo stammers, watching in growing horror as Tubbo steps up and starts trying to break one off from its stem, yanks on his arm frantically hissing, "*Tubbo-!*"

"Chill, it's my tia's house, she's not going to care...shit- fucker is tough, here can you use your claws?" Tubbo moves his hands to give Ranboo space to step in, but he's still unsure, darting worried glances at the house set into the hillside and figures *tia* has to be some family



relation, stumbles forwards when Tubbo drags him in with one of his hands, “Come on you goof, stop worrying.”

*Wow never considered that before what a concept*, Ranboo thinks sardonically but let’s Tubbo wrap one of his hands around Ranboo’s, pulling them up to the abused section of plant stalk and then pantomimes a cutting gesture. Rolling his eyes, Ranboo runs the edge of one of his claws through the stalk, slicing a neat line in it so it topples off effortlessly, falling into one of Tubbo’s waiting hands.

“Ya’know, I always forget you can like, disembowel me.” Tubbo jokes, turning the sunflower around in his hands, picking off extra leaves so it’s just a clean stem, and then flicks his eyes up to meet Ranboo’s, motions for him to come closer, “Lean down for me?”

And Ranboo does like an idiot, lets Tubbo brush wayward hair over his left ear, tucking the sunflower into place gently, fingers combing lightly through his hair before pulling away, and Ranboo shivers, mind latching onto that sensation and running away with it, bombarding him with fantasies of those same fingers carefully pulling sections together in a braid, world spinning around him when Tubbo murmurs, “There, perfect.”

The rest of the walk into town is a blur, Ranboo lost in daydreams, keeps reaching up to check and make sure the sunflower is still there, that it’s real, can’t believe when it is every single time. *Perfect...he called you perfect looked you dead in your mismatched eyes and called you perfect...you, the biggest fuck up disaster in existence*, his mind keeps repeating in a daze, eyes staring unseeing yet entirely focused on the red dirt road in front of him, transfixed watching his toes press into the warm earth.

When they do get into downtown Avelare, Ranboo’s shaken out of his stupor, caught up in how beautiful the town looks, thick garlands of flowers and colorful ribbons stretching wide over the road, paper lanterns decorated with hand painted suns strung out at regular intervals. There’s already a troop of musicians playing, their music rising lively and bouncing into the rich blue sky, clouds just starting to go molten gold in the light of the setting sun.

“Aaah, made it in time! Come on, Boo boy!” Tubbo calls excitedly, looping a set of arms around one of Ranboo’s as he drags him off to a crowded section of town, worms his way through the throng of people without a single care. Ranboo offers quiet apologies as they squeeze past, gets brilliant grins and a few hearty slaps on the back for his troubles, is a little bewildered and sore by the time Tubbo comes to a stop outside a colorful booth.

The setup for the game is simple, take an underweighted ball and try and knock milk bottles over, and Ranboo hangs back and watches for a minute, tail curling behind him as he sees children, and Tubbo, fail over and over again despite the simple math involved. When it’s his turn, Ranboo tosses the ball around in his hands, getting a pretty good estimate of its mass, ignores Tubbo harassing him from the sidelines for taking too long, does the quick calculation for where he needs to hit and how much force to use, smirks as the entire stack topples in one hit.

Tubbo gapes at him, gaggle of kids cheering Ranboo on as he spins the second ball on the tip of one of his claws, simpering over all the noise, “What? Like it’s *that* hard.”

*Fuck off bitch*, Tubbo mouths at him, shaking his head with a grin, crouches down to listen to some question Lalus has, keeps shooting Ranboo glances out of the corner of his eye, clearly wanting to let him know he's still paying attention, that he's still there. It's incredibly kind, but it's not going to stop Ranboo from rubbing Tubbo's face into the dirt more with his clear superiority, and he's not really sure he's going to make it, but Ranboo throws his second toss with only a quick look over his shoulder.

He grins wide and smug hearing another stack come tumbling down, hot streak of pride igniting warm in his chest with the way Tubbo looks at him, *awe and admiration and affection he cares he cares so much about you no doubt proud of you*, and the heady rush of endorphins has him tipping his head back in laughter.

They head to the other game booths, doggedly followed by their swarm of kids, and no matter what it is, Ranboo dominates it easily, tries explaining that he's *not magic*, just good at mental math to Heli and Magnola, but they won't believe him, untangle ribbons from their hair and ask to braid his. Ranboo's entire face flushes all the way to his hairline, tail poofing out in embarrassment as he stutters his way through excuses, manages to get them to leave off, but they insist on him keeping the ribbons, say it's for good luck or something.

He knots them around his right wrist and ruffles shaking hands through his hair, heart pounding fast even though he knows they couldn't have known, they're just kids, they probably haven't been taught about other cultures and their union customs yet. *Ancients of the Deep* though, but his pulse is racing, and Ranboo makes the stupid mistake of finding Tubbo in the crowd, mouth going dry as his brain supplies him with an image of a cariad braid in Tubbo's hair, tucked behind his left ear, violently shakes his head to clear it.

Once it gets a little darker, the game booths close up and restaurants, er, not really- more like people's *homes* open up, couples serving townsfolk from out kitchen windows and their front yards, tables drug outside and laden down with food that you're just expected to run up and take. There's no assigned seating or table numbers, apparently no protocol for who goes first, and Ranboo knots his fingers together and apart, has no idea what he's supposed to be doing.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Ranboo whispers for the twelfth time, hovering awkwardly over Tubbo's shoulder while he fixes the two of them plates, keeps popping bites of stuff in his mouth as he goes, absentmindedly nodding his head and answers for the twelfth time, "Yes, Boo, now do you eat turnip greens or not?"

Ender aren't really suited to vegetarianism, most of his teeth too sharp and not super great at shredding plant matter, bits of leaves getting caught in between them, but everything Ranboo tries is delicious, warm spices and peppery greens inside pillowy dough, pungent leaves wrapping up savory mushroom hashes, fresh baked seed bread, ripe summer berries and of course, more honey wine than he knows what to do with.

"I looked it up before we left HQ and it should be fine for you to drink, just, go slow I guess." Tubbo tells him, passing over a ceramic mug filled with the amber liquid, and Ranboo cautiously sticks his tongue in it, gets nothing but the faintest burn of alcohol and nothing more, takes a cautious sip and trills in surprise, "It's sweet."

“It’s *honey wine*.” Tubbo bitches back with a fond smile, taking a drink from his own mug, and Ranboo swats him with his tail where they sit cross legged in someone’s front yard, finishing their dinner while Flous and Torrus go running past playing tag in miniature versions of Tubbo’s outfit, grass stains all over the linen of their shirts.

It seems like half the town comes up to talk to them at some point or another, Tubbo introducing everyone as *tia* or *tio* or *preme*, and they all greet Ranboo enthusiastically, ask him how he’s doing with what looks like genuine interest, *thank him* for coming when he’s the one that should be *thanking them*, but they always laugh whenever he tries, wave off his concerns with easy smiles.

“They’re all so nice.” He whispers the next time they have a second alone, and Tubbo shrugs, shoveling a pile of sauteed greens in his mouth, “Our town’s small.”

But Ranboo doesn’t think that’s just it, watching people interact with one another, how, even though they all look different, they act like they’re one family, *a proper one*, one that actually cares for each other, and despite the fact that he sticks out like a sore thumb, Ranboo kinda gets the feeling he’s included in that now, at least for tonight.

He tips his head back and sighs, smiles a little dopily at the pink clouds drifting past overhead, warm wind ruffling through his hair, caressing at the bare skin of his arms, content, solid feeling settled in his limbs, in his bones, pleasant heaviness pinning him down here, to the earth, this moment, to someone’s gorgeous garden on Apidae, sweet sound of voices and jaunty music rising into the twilight.

“You look happy.” Tubbo murmurs softly, *words only for you eyes only for you too*, Ranboo realizes when he turns to him, quiet, gentle contemplation in his gaze, and he smiles, unforced and genuine, just like when he responds honestly, “I am.”

It’s amazing that it’s not lie, and it really isn’t, Ranboo following along at Tubbo’s side with a spring in his step he’s not sure he’s ever had, or maybe, has only ever felt very briefly, mind pulling up memories of sitting and dying of heat stroke but listening avidly as Tubbo told him story after story, of the frozen rush of teleporting an inch within range, the all consuming euphoria when he finally caught him, just- every memory from Tjhia-Yuet, reading aloud along the lakeshore and dancing barefoot in the cargo hold and Tubbo sleeping in his arms.

Ranboo’s not naive enough to assume it’s going to last, but he enjoys it while he can, returns the waves others give him, holds his borrowed skirt out for a group of cooing girls to admire, flowers tucked behind their ears as well, gets roped into a game of tag with Heli and Torrus and Flous, stands waiting for one of them to come rushing at him, and blinks out of existence at the last second, comes dropping from the ether behind them howling in laughter.

With most everyone finished eating, the music picks up sharply, people cheering as they start to pair off, entire town square evolving into a dance floor within seconds, and Ranboo watches wide eyed as dancers spin in fast circles. It’s incredible watching them move, how light and graceful they are on their feet, iridescent wings flaring in time to the music and catching the lights from the lanterns overhead, the dancers beating them to soar through the air as part of the routine

*Tubbo did that once nearly drug you over*, he remembers with a grin, bouncing on the tips of his toes in time to the music, and Ranboo loves dancing, would be out there in a heartbeat, but he's not sure if he's allowed to right now, silently bemoaning his lack of wings when a hot grip wraps around his arm.

"Come on!" Tubbo laughs, dragging him out to the center of the square, moves Ranboo into position and takes his hands with his upper ones, lower set draped loosely around his waist, starts to slowly lead them in the same dance everyone else is doing, likely thinking he needs to give Ranboo time to learn it.

Well he should know better, because Ranboo's been watching the dancers for a few minutes now and has most of the steps memorized, picks their pace up to Tubbo's delight, twirls him under an arm as fast and tight as everyone else, feet moving quick over the cobblestones in time to Tubbo's, sliding past one another and catching their hands together on the other side, reeling the other back in like dual orbiting suns.

Ranboo twists through their arms again and again, never gets lost never gets dizzy, keeps his eyes trained on Tubbo's as they spin across the square, mindful of the people flying overhead, laughing breathless and wild when the song comes to an end, joins in as the crowd claps and cheers, gets into a new position as another song starts beating to life.

The other dances he has to learn as he goes, but Ranboo's a quick study, finds himself easily falling into place for line dances, grabs hands and is lead through the square with a stranger on either side, spins through the arms of a dozen partners, always finds his way back to Tubbo for paired dances though, seems like no one else is there when he turns around.

He doesn't mind in the slightest, not when it means their fingers are laced together, Ranboo moving across the uneven street like it's something he's always done, skirt flaring out around his knees as he twirls in fast circles, bare feet kicking up in time to the jumping music same as everyone else, growing light headed and hot in the sticky summer night.

In between songs, he and Tubbo stumble giggly and hazy back to where the food's still laid out, grab snacks and new mugs of honey wine, the sweet, cold taste of it hitting the spot like nothing else, has the world going fuzzy around the edges, makes Ranboo's movements more fluid and carefree as he stops thinking so much.

He ends up just spinning the two of them around in circles in someone's yard, Tubbo ducking under his arm sloppily and their feet get tangled up together, both of them falling over in a heap, lay splayed out in the cool grass and laugh until their sides hurt, until Tubbo starts making that rattling humming noise Ranboo loves.

Rolling over on his side, Ranboo smushes his face into an arm and smiles mushily at Tubbo's side profile scrunched up in hysterical laughter, how messy his hair's gotten from all the dancing, color high on his cheeks and the tip of his nose just like being *stuck behind that power panel snatches of him from in between cables most beautiful thing you've ever seen the way he laughs*, and his chest feels like it's overflowing with how much he feels for this one person.

*I love you*, Ranboo thinks helplessly, kicking his feet up as he moves past Tubbo, skirt flowing up and out with the movement, *Ancients I love you so much*, spins and already knows there's going to be hands to catch him, impossibly warm fingers lacing through his, pulling him closer, closer than anyone else is, *my sunshine my cariad love of my life never going to leave you*, and Ranboo sways on his feet, caught up and lost forever in those endless dark blue eyes, *no one else only you I'm yours for the rest of eternity*, impulsively dips Tubbo and grins until it hurts, hearing the way he laughs.

Reality is starting to feel a little weird, Ranboo lost sense of his mental hallway a long time ago, nothing in his head but prickling static and sunlight as he hauls Tubbo back up, leans down to bring their foreheads together, trilling deep in his chest when he feels that achingly lovely ticklish sensation dragging over his horn, twists into the contact.

“Bo...” He feels slip slow and warm out of his mouth, absolutely no control over anything and it's *amazing*, feels like he's in a fever dream, *love you love you have I told you yet*, smiles at how languorously Tubbo blinks at him, *don't think I have but I will*, laughing because his head feels extra really stupid and everything's really warm and really nice and he *wants to*, “Bo, heeey, hi.”

“Hi.” Tubbo whispers back, mischievous grin on his face that makes a dimple appear and wow, Ranboo really loves him, has he told him that yet can't remember and that's new, usually he can't *stop* remembering and fuck he loves it, gets distracted because Tubbo's saying something else, “I think...you *migh* ' be a liliil'drink- *dronk*- d-dranks?”

“Yeah, yeeeaah...wait- yeah.” Ranboo agrees, still a little confused as to what he's agreeing to, but Tubbo laughs so it's fine, he loves him and everything's fine again. Only moving back enough so they can keep dancing, Ranboo wobbles kinda unsteady on his feet, but Tubbo's there and Ranboo loves him, spinning as fast as they can around the square, bugs singing in the night and undercutting the music that beats in Ranboo's ears like a second heartbeat and he loves him.

And it gets kinda lost after that, everything blurring together in a glowing sweep of fingers laced through his and swirling yellow skirts, hot press of bodies close together under the purple of a summer night, sweet burn of alcohol down his throat and the cloying stickiness of honey on his tongue, and after holding on for so long, Ranboo's mind eventually buckles and everything tips into oblivion.

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### **Lesson Twenty-Seven: Do not reminisce on what you have lost for it will weigh you down**

Ranboo skips down the hall, doesn't care that Meleeri would be swatting at him or holding him back by his shoulder to get him to stop, he just- can't contain how *excited* he is! Because mama *specifically* asked for him to be brought to her, sent her personal guard to come fetch him from morning lessons, wouldn't let Meleeri keep him despite how she so clearly wanted to.

Bounding ahead of the guard, Ranboo doesn't really need to have her following to know how to get to mama's room, goes this way enough on his own, could also teleport right there if he needed to, but mama wanted that to stay a secret between them.

*Don't let your father know*, mama's voice whispers to him and Ranboo falters like he always does, trying to figure out why mama wanted to lie to father, thought cariards weren't supposed to keep things from one another. *It's probably because he worries about her*, he thinks, coming to a jumping stop outside mama's door, *you tire her out and he just wants her to get better*, and he deflates a little, knowing that's the most likely case.

*B-But mama likes seeing me*, Ranboo reminds himself, scooting out of the way so the guard can let him in, and as soon as the door opens a fraction, he squirms past her legs, dashing across the room and teleports those last few feet, dropping out of thin air a little too high up and bounces wildly on the bed.

"Mama!" He giggles, shoving wayward hair out of his face and freezes immediately, brows pinching down in worry with how pale mama looks, almost like a ghost, and he scrambles up the bed towards her, "M-Mama? What's w-wrong?"

Her eyes don't even open, head listlessly turning in his direction, and he settles on his knees by her shoulder, still can hardly hear her as she whispers, "Ran...boo...my son...my littlest..."

"Hi mama." Ranboo says just as soft, hesitantly reaches a hand out and feels at her forehead, doesn't really know what he's supposed to be checking for, but her skin feels weird under his fingers and he pulls back quickly, "Are you okay?"

"Yes...y-yes." Mama hushes through cracked lips, fingers twitching against her blankets like they're trying to move to touch him but just can't find the energy to get up, "I'm...I'm fine...co...come here, darling."

Ranboo has to pick her arm up to wiggle under it, and it's hard, he's basically supporting all of it, and it thuds heavy over him, like mama doesn't have control over it anymore. He tucks his head on the edge of her chest and smiles when she leans down to press her nose into his hair, shaky exhales leaving her throat.

"Ranboo...Ranboo listen to me." Mama says, arm pulling him in a little closer, fingers resting limply over his side, and he reaches down to hang onto them, his hand too small to really fit in hers, "I...care for you...so much...care for *you* the *most*...understand?"

"You like me better than Reshaa?" Ranboo asks a little bewildered because *everyone* likes Reshaa better, but it makes sense, she's the heir, and he's not even a spare, he's...he's not really sure *what* he is, until mama nods jerkily, "Yes, *yes*, darling...Ranboo, my littlest...never forget I care for you."

*I'm mama's favorite*, Ranboo thinks in pride, wiggling closer, tipping his head up into hers happily, "I won't mama! I have a really good memory! Wanna hear this book I read yesterday?"

“L-Later...darling, okay? Just...” And mama heaves with a cough, jerks away sharply and Ranboo plops over without her there to support him, turns and looks at her in alarm, “M-Mama?”

“N-Never- *never c-change* Ranboo...never-” Mama loses her words again, and he scrabbles upright, frantic but he *doesn't know what to do*, has no idea how to heal someone, clutches at the blankets as she regains her breath, “Don't let them- don't let them *g-get to you, don't- d-don't- let them c-change you-*”

“O-okay.” He agrees quietly, scared because he has no idea what's going on, doesn't know who *they* are, why he needs to stay away from them, and mama raises a hand with what looks like great effort, starts fiddling with her cariad braid, and Ranboo's eyes go wide as she undoes her bead, slipping it off the end so the braid begins to unravel.

“You a-are good and kind and...and *smart*, d-don't e-ever think y-you're- *you're not.*” Mama wheezes, reaches out her trembling hand towards him, and it collapses before it can get to him, but Ranboo meets her halfway, doesn't understand why she presses her bead into his palm, “I-I'll a-always be with...be with y-you-”

“I don't- m-mama? A-Are you g-go-goi- um are you going somewhere?” Ranboo asks in concern, looks down at the golden bead in his hands, runs careful claws over it, snaps his head up when mama hushes, “Y-Yes...a-and I'm so- so *sorry*, I-I can't stay w...with y-you anymore...”

“No! N-No! You c-cant!” Ranboo cries, fingers curling harsh around the bead as he clutches them to his front, scared this is what Meleeri always means, what will happen if he doesn't behave, *sit down stop fidgeting know how to behave bad things happen to children who cannot listen.*

“I'm so sorry...”

“*Don't leave me!*” Ranboo wails and scoots forward fast on his knees, wants to be closer *has to be closer don't leave please stay only one that looks at me that listens I don't wanna be alone*, clicking hard in the back of his throat, “Mama *please!*”

Brows pinched in concentration, mama lifts a shaking arm, clammy, weak fingers brushing jerkily over his cheek, frantic beeping picking up around them, “I'm...I'm so sorry...I don't...I don't wa-want to go.”

“T-Then s-stay, *p-p-please.*” Ranboo whimpers, one of his hands coming up to curl around her wrist, to keep her trembling hand on his face that much longer, and still, it feels like she's slipping out of his grasp, her voice nearly drowned out by the sound of people shouting loud behind them, “I-I can't...re-remember me, o-okay? P-Promise me Ranboo...”

“*I-I-I promise- I-I pr-promise-!*” He sobs, *I can be good I can behave please don't leave don't go stay here stay with me I'll be good*, rubs his face into her slackening hold, “*D-Don't go! Don't! Don't!*”

“Re-re...member what...I told you.” Mama murmurs, head tipping to the side, and someone’s yelling for him, but Ranboo won’t listen, leans forward wildly to try and catch the words sighing out of her mouth, “Y-You are...you are *good*...you...are...y-you d-deserve care...love...I- I wish I-”

But he doesn’t hear what she was going to say, scooped up under the arms and torn from the bed, her wrist wrenched out of his hold as he’s drug away, screaming at the top of his lungs as mama disappears behind a crowd of people.

The servants that grabbed him take him back to his room, talking fast about *draw the bath* and *said it’s not contagious but* and *how does he keep getting in there*, ignoring Ranboo as he begs and pleads to be taken back, so he can try and convince mama to stay, but they won’t listen, turn a deaf ear and he *panics*.

Keeping mama’s bead locked up in one fist, Ranboo slashes out with the other, gouges lines across hands and faces, shrieks to try and drown out the cries of alarm, *of pain*, twists and squirms to break free but they won’t let him go, fling him in his room and slam the door shut.

Ranboo hits the ground hard and gets all the breath knocked out of him, room spinning around him as he gasps, makes it easier for the servants to grab him, haul him up and pin his arms behind his back, keep him from swiping at them as they draw the bath.

They strip him down and threaten to bind his hands if he won’t behave and Ranboo shrinks back, heart thundering loud in his ears as he lets them set him in the tub, hisses at the hot temperature and how hard they scrub. Soap accidentally drips down into his eyes, and he reaches up to scrub it away, recoils when his hand gets slapped away, a servant girl glaring vehemently as she snaps, “If you claw me again you wretched little thing, *I swear-*”

“Ena, watch your tongue.” Another hushes, dumps a cup full of water over Ranboo’s head and makes the soap run into his eyes more, but he refuses to scrub it away, sits there and shrinks into himself further, doesn’t protest anymore because *he’s bad he messed up knows better than that maybe that’s why mama’s leaving because she’s sick of him now too*.

And that thought steals all the air from his lungs, makes icy chills race up and down his spine, and he keeps his head down throughout the rest of the bath, he’ll be good from now on, he’ll listen and do what they say, and then maybe mama won’t leave.

Ranboo’s getting dried off, keeps having to shift the bead from fist to fist so they won’t see, when there’s a loud knock on his door, and he whirls around, hopes it’s mama’s guard come to get him again, but when one of the servants opens it, it’s *father* standing there, but he doesn’t look right.

He doesn’t have his cape on, nor his crown, and Ranboo blinks in confusion because he looks so strange without them, smaller somehow, but that’s not what makes him worried, it’s the look in his eyes, *how empty they are just like mama’s*, like all the lights have gone off inside him, an empty husk of a shell same as the bugs that molt them in the daysetting.

No one stops Ranboo as he shuffles over in his towel, hesitates before wrapping his fingers around a couple of father’s like he did with mama, doesn’t want him to leave too, squeezes a



little as he looks up at him, “Father?”

Slowly, haltingly, father turns his head down to look at him, and it’s weird, but Ranboo doesn’t think he’s really *seeing him*, sways closer and tugs at his hand, *I’m here I’m good I behave don’t leave me either*, “I-I care for you, s-so don’t um, don’t l-leave me okay? I care for y-”

And Ranboo watches father’s lips shape the words, can hear them in his mind, but they don’t make any sense, don’t register, and that’s not- t-that’s not *that’s not that’snotthatstnotthatsnOTTHATSNOTHATS-*

His legs buckle, collapsing to the ground without anything to support him, screams until he can’t anymore, mama’s cariad bead burning into his palm like a brand, just like father’s words sear themselves into his mind, a scar he’s never going to get rid of.

“Your mother’s dead.”

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It is almost uncomfortably hot, scorching like sunrays or fire right at his fingertips but it’s everywhere, completely enveloping him where he floats in an abyss, feels like maybe he’s curled up at the center of some star, safe millions of lightyears away where no one will ever find him.

That sounds nice, to be lost for a while, but not alone he thinks, doesn’t want to be by himself, not anymore, wants to be lost with someone that knows him, that understands, arm curling around the solid shape of something else at the center of this inferno, nuzzling down into wispy pieces of nebula that float past, tickling at his nose.

He can’t help it when he sneezes a little, the motion jarring him and sends him slipping out of the sun, dropping slowly back into a body that’s still heavy with sleep and a mind that’s struggling to pull itself together, and Ranboo groans, attempts to bury his face in his pillow.

Except when he goes to do it, it’s not a pillow his face makes contact with, it’s undeniably a head of hair and he pries an eye open, stares stupidly at chestnut brown curls for a long time before it registers in his clunky brain what- *who he’s looking at fuck shit what have you done geT UP-*

Ranboo tries to move back *fast*, but as soon as he puts pressure on an arm to leverage himself up, his center of gravity shifts and he goes crashing back down, accidentally falling on Tubbo as whatever surface he’s on sways wildly. Tubbo makes several indignant noises, rolling over and slapping at Ranboo to get off him, but there’s *nowhere for him to go like he’s caught in a cocoon*, and in his confusion, he keeps slipping back into Tubbo like the universe is punishing Ranboo for well- *a lot of deserved things really*.

The only way any semblance of order gets restored is when Tubbo flips over and loops an arm around his waist, dragging him back down for good, hooks their legs together to stop his squirming and mumbles into his front, “Fuckin’ *stahp*.”

“B-But I- Tub-” Is all Ranboo manages to get out before *pain* is exploding behind his eyes and he crumples over. It takes too much energy to force himself away so he gives up, sagging into Tubbo’s touch and whines pathetically at how his head is *pounding*.

“S’too early.” Tubbo grumbles, burying his head somewhere under Ranboo’s chin, other arm draping over his side, seems perfectly content to go back to sleep like this, but despite the fact that it feels like he’s being *lobotomized with a drill Ancients of the Deep*- Ranboo knows this is a bad idea, struggles to say, “I- I...shoul’ um- move- to...uuuh- bed-”

“Nooo.” Tubbo demands muzzily, arms tightening like he really thinks it’s going to be hard convincing Ranboo to stay, twists his head to the side and says a bit more clearly, “M’comf.”

“Bo-” Ranboo tries to argue and then very rudely gets slapped in the mouth with an antenna, shakes his head back, which is a mistake *ow*, but there’s nowhere to go and he keeps getting lightly hit in the face, bitches halfheartedly, “You’re jus’ - *the worst*. ”

Tubbo hums out something that is almost a laugh, but is mostly just sleepy noises that buzz warmly through Ranboo’s chest where they’re touching, “Mmm, callin’ bullshit on tha’ one bossman.”

“S’ttrue.” Ranboo insists grumpily, tips his chin up and manages to trap Tubbo’s assailant antenna against the top of his head, mumbles into his hair with no malice, “Detest you.”

“M’not wha’ you...said las’ nigh’.” Tubbo says around a huge yawn, most of his sentence lost to incomprehensible noises, and Ranboo huffs out a pained giggle, headache really starting to kick up a notch, slips his eyes closed and murmurs tiredly, “Yeah? What’d I say then? Tha’ I dislike you, that I ab...*abhor* you, or-”

“You tol’ me you loved me.”

And Ranboo stops breathing.

His eyes snap wide open where they were half lidded with sleep just a moment ago, stares unseeing at a swath of colorful fabric that narrows down with encroaching darkness as his heart thunders wildly, every instinct he has screaming at him to *run to get away something bad’s coming flee while you still can what did you do what did you say nightmare not real not real can’t be get out gET AWAY-*

Tubbo sits up abruptly, concerned pinch to his face as he squints his eyes in the morning light, hand fumbling around at Ranboo’s front, spreading out over where his heart is currently trying to break out of his ribcage, “Holy shit, y-you okay? What’s wrong? A-Are you having a panic attack?”

Choking on an attempted inhale, Ranboo feels like his entire chest cavity is filled up with magma, burning through his bones so what’s left crumples inwards, can’t get air into his lungs can’t make his mouth work, stares up at Tubbo in dazed panic and feels like he’s dying *can’t be real has to be a nightmare you didn’t you couldn’t whaT DID YOU SAY TO HIM WERE NEVER SUPPOSED TO TELL HIM-*

“O-Okay, *okay*, Boo, *Boo* I-I need you to listen to me okay? You’re fine, it’s going to be okay, I promise.” Tubbo insists in a shaky voice he’s trying to smooth out into something more calm, leans down and strokes a set of fire bright fingers across Ranboo’s cheek and *it kills him*, “You are *okay*, you’re safe and you’re not wherever you think you are, you’re here with me.”

*That’s the problem can’t be happening isn’t real you’ve finally snapped was only a matter of time trapped in delusions for the rest of your life*, and Ranboo makes a strangled noise, tries to move away from Tubbo, *the specter of him this isn’t real you’re insane you’ve always been insane thousand cracks in your mind that lead nowhere-*

“*Fuck-* Boo, hey, hey, I’m right here, I’m not going to hurt you-”

*Yes you are yes you are you’re not real go away black stained concrete and wavy shape in front of you I came back I came back for you LIAR-*

“-it’s me, it’s Tubbo, your partner your-”

*-my cariad my sunshine my everything don’t go stay with me and I’ll stay with you not real not real geT A GRIP-*

“-just breathe, okay? It’s *okay-*”

*-dizzying slide of black walls all the way to the ground feet angling out over the side one nudge that’s all you need can’t won’t not agAIN-*

“-i-it’s going to be okay, you know I love y-”

*-LIAR LIAR LIAR LAIRLAIRIALAIORIALIR-*

“*Shut up-*” Ranboo finally gasps, heaves like he’s going to throw up just trying to get air into his oxygen starved body, feels like he’s spinning off into the abyss, one wrong move and over the side he goes, “Just *shut up!* Y-You’re not r-real! You’re n-not you’re not you’re NOT! L-Leave me *alone LEAVE ME AL-!*”

His frantic protests get cut off as a weight thuds into him, two sets of arms wiggling under his back, holding him tight *keeping him grounded keeping him from slipping over the edge*, and he doesn’t think, fists his claws in the back of Tubbo’s shirt and holds on for dear life as reality pitches like freefall.

“M’right here, Ranboo.” Tubbo mumbles into the crook of his neck, twists his head until he’s tucked under Ranboo’s chin just like- *jungle insects singing around you all night warm comforting weight pinning you down think you might love him in the dawn light-* “An’ m’so sorry, so sorry, Boo, but I’m right here. *I’m right here.*”

Ranboo keens long and low, aching pain racing down his arms and settling like dead weights in his fingertips, desperate urge to *sink them into something need something solid something sturdy have to hold on slipping away one breath at a time*, but there’s nothing and he’s *scared*, that this is it this is over, that as soon as he’s calmed down Tubbo’s going to look him

in the eyes and tell him *I know you love me but I can't feel the same way care for you but not like that never like that*, and a wailing cry tears its way out of his throat.

He can't be alone again *he can't*, not after finally realizing what it means to be cared for, but he's going to be, couldn't keep his fucking mouth shut, couldn't keep those damned doors locked *and it's all crumbling down around him*.

Tubbo's going to leave him after this and the specters are going to find him, sink their claws in and haul Ranboo kicking and screaming back to the ledge, force him over the side and gum up his mind so he can't think, can't calculate, *can't stop the ground rushing back up to greet him good riddance no one would mourn for you shadow on the wall no one's ever cared and no one ever will you're going to die alone*-

"Boo, *please*, j-just breathe- in one two, o-out one two, *shit*- I-love you, Boo, love you so much. Please just breathe." Vibrates against his neck, shakes through him like an earthquake, and he sobs, clicking hard in the back of his throat, inhales staggering in his lungs as he begs, "*S-Stop! Stop l-lying to me! J-Just go- j-just go aw-away!*"

This hallucination is worse than every other combined, and Ranboo's just waiting for the knife to sink in, for this specter of Tubbo to pull back and look down at him, smiling nasty and cruel, laugh at how stupid he is, *how naive*, for thinking he could *ever be loved*-

And Tubbo does pull back sharply and Ranboo cries pathetically, seeing the thunderous expression on his face, and it's worse than the brutal amusement, more accurate to how he'd react, *furiously and livid and disgusted do you think you have a right to this after everything you did after what your father's father did to my people my planet wish I'd never met you should've let him shoot me I hate y-*

"*I love you* and I'm not lying. I'm real and *I'm here* and I love you." Tubbo says with all the steadfast, deadly accuracy of a photon cannon discharging, feels like a hole gets blasted straight through Ranboo, like the world has been ripped out from under his feet, "I told you last night, but I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it until you'll believe me. I love you, Ranboo, I love you so much."

*Told me last night what is he talking about can't remember everything's hazy dancing and his smile and there's nothing there I don't know I don't know I don'T KNOW-* Ranboo thinks in a panic, scrambling through his maze trying to find some *coherent memory* after Tubbo mentioned he was drunk- *drink drunk drunks* -and comes up with *nothing*.

His claws flex spastically, hates having gaps in his mind like this, worries and needles and picks at the ragged hole from last night, gaping spot where a door's supposed to be, but at least this one doesn't bleed around the edges, not like the gaping black maw that leaks dark liquid out when he's not paying attention, shakes his head and stammers frantically, "Y-You're lying-! Y-You- you- you can't w-wouldn't *not p-possible-*"

"I'm not lying, I told you I'd never lie to you again." Tubbo says gently, reaches down so very very slowly with one of his hands and brushes wayward hair out of Ranboo's eyes, "It's okay if you don't believe me, I still love you even if you don't, and it's okay, Boo, *it's okay*. I'll be here...I'm not going anywhere else. I won't leave you, *promise*, so take your time."

His fingers trail slowly off Ranboo's face, *like the last rays of the setting sun don't leave please stay*, and before they're gone completely, Ranboo lurches forward, desperate to keep the contact desperate to *hope, is this real does it matter it does trust him can't scared liar*, swallows hard when Tubbo goes to cup his cheek, stutters, "A-Are you- are y-you sure?"

"Yes."

It's so *immediate* that Ranboo almost doesn't process it, blinks wide eyes up at Tubbo who smiles at him softly, hair ruffled from sleep and falling messily in his eyes, morning light hitting bright on the planes of his face, adoration in his eyes as he looks at *Ranboo* like he's worth *everything*.

And he's *not*, is barely worth the resources he has to consume to stay alive, honestly probably does more harm than good, so Tubbo *has to be* mistaken, must not be thinking clearly, might still be a little inebriated even, and Ranboo shakes his head, "H-How? Why do you- w-why do you think t-that you l-lo-?"

"Because you're kind." Tubbo says as he tips his head to the side, shaking curls out of his eyes, thumb sweeping out in slow arcs under Ranboo's eye, "Because you care so much about me, about the universe, the people in it. You have such a big heart, Boo, it's incredible."

*Lie, there's nothing worthwhile in you never has been little shadow*, whispers over the top of his head, and Ranboo shivers, about to tell her to *go away*, but her cackling disappears like mist burning off in the heat of the day when he hears, "You make me so happy, just by being around, putting up with all the crap that you do. And I can never thank you enough, for deciding it was worth it to come with me."

*Does he not know how could he not easiest thing you've ever done like breathing like teleporting*

"It wasn't a hard choice." Ranboo murmurs, thinks he might be drunk still with how his head doesn't feel like it's attached to his body, reaches a trembling hand up and wraps his fingers lightly around Tubbo's wrist, *don't go please stay*, "*Ancients*, it was never a hard choice, I-I'd go with you *anywhere*, Bo."

Tubbo huffs out a wet laugh, ducks his head and looks up through his bangs, shy smile on his lips, "See? That's what I'm talking about, how could I *not* love you?"

"Easily, so, s-so very *easily*, I-"

"I love how smart you are." Tubbo whispers, cutting him off in the sweetest way, rest of his hands flitting down to make their home carding through Ranboo's hair, scratching around the base of his horns, fingers trailing up the left one, "*Fuck*, you're so smart, Boo, *so smart*. You think up things I never could even imagine, and the way your brain works is just- *it's amazing*."

*Even with the cracks even with the chained doors and the skeletons and the specters even though you're insane he thinks you're worth something thinks you're amazing does he really-*

“I love how much passion you have for learning and just- *life*, I guess. I love getting to see your honest reactions, love knowing what makes you excited and what you enjoy...and I’m so happy I get to share it with you, thank you for sharing it with me.”

*Knows you down to your bones dangerous stupid gonna hurt you but he’s not never again he promised cares for you so much maybe he does maybe he doesn’t maybe it’s real-*

“You’re so strong, Ranboo, *so strong*. You’ve been through so much and you’re still here, you’re *still trying*. A-And I admire that so much, it- i-it helps me be strong to...to know you’re here. I hope I do that for you, I just- I love you so much, I-I’ve never met anyone else like you.”

*Love you love you love you loved you for so long no one else but you I’m yours for the rest of eternity stay by your side forever and...you’ll stay by mine oh Ancients how how does he can’t be real but it is loves you too-*

“You’re one in a million, Ranboo, and I love you all the more for it.” Tubbo tells him like *he means it*, and it’s sitting next to him on a barstool *you’re kinda awesome you know that* and it’s dark bloodstained concrete but *you mean more than the whole galaxy* and it’s standing on a red dirt road bent down sunflower behind your ear *there, perfect-*

And Ranboo breaks down sobbing, throat constricting tight around the sounds, body unsure how to process the amount of emotions storming through him like a rupture in the earth’s surface, dragging molten magma out with it, but it’s not bad, it’s warm and it’s grounding and it’s-

*-what did I say darling deserve love you’d know when you found them don’t doubt yourself always believed in you always cared for you my littlest one-*

“*Fuck!* S-Shit I-I’m so sorry! Shouldn’t have- *shit*, s-sorry, should’ve known better, t-too much I-I know, sorry, *so sor-*” Tubbo’s apologies peter out as Ranboo hauls him down, snakes his arms under his wings so he won’t hurt them when he crushes them together, crying and giggling and generally sounding completely unhinged as he tries to say, “N-No-! N-N-No, I’m- um, I-I’m- *so hap-py*.”

The last bit of his sentence breaks off abruptly as a hysterical sob shakes out of his mouth, and Ranboo twists his face into the crook of Tubbo’s neck, feels how fast his pulse is going and lets the heat he radiates melt through him, and it’s okay now, *it’s okay for him to enjoy this*, whispers terrified but giddy, “I-I l-lo-love you.”

*Will he won’t he regret what did you do assuming projecting naive insane idi-*

“I love you too.” And Ranboo cries so *deliriously happy*, never thought he’d ever get to hear those words spoken to him, one hand flying up to cup the back of Tubbo’s head, trembling claws carding carefully through his hair. *Ancients*, Ranboo’s going to get to braid Tubbo’s hair, *Tubbo’s going to braid his*, and he sputters out a series of nonsense noises, tail worming free to curl possessively around one of Tubbo’s legs, deep, trilling purr rattling in his chest.

*Cariad cariad cariad love of my life I'm the love of his my one and only my sunshine my heart love him love him so much-*

"Didn't know you purred." Tubbo murmurs, hands still playing through Ranboo's hair and he shivers, so incredibly glad now it's as long as it is, can't wait to feel the weight of a braid tucked behind his ear, "Mmm, you're really like a house cat."

"Shut up." Ranboo laughs wetly, thudding the side of his head gently into Tubbo's, hears the smile in his voice when he starts singing that *horrible* song from George's home planet, "*What's new pussycat? Waaaah wooaah ooooo-*"

"Stooooop!" Ranboo complains loudly with a smile, nuzzling his head into the underside of Tubbo's chin, gets him to break off his singing in a fit of laughter, and it devolves into something like a tickle fight, the two of them hitting and slapping at each other in the confines of Tubbo's hammock, send it swaying wildly.

Ranboo wheezes when a set of Tubbo's hands find his sides, can't get away from him so he flicks his tail across Tubbo's bare feet, finally gets him to leave off with a jumping shrieking as he collapses to the side, still giggling a little, "O-Okay! Okay! Truce?"

"I suppose." Ranboo drawls, twisting to face him better, reaches out because he can, he's allowed to do this now, and strokes his fingers across Tubbo's cheek, feels it when they lift in a grin, dark blue eyes shuttering as he mumbles, "Love'ya, you dork."

"I love you too." He whispers back, still can't believe this is real, that this is his to have, smooths his hand out to rest on the back of Tubbo's neck, long fingers questing up into his hair as Tubbo sighs contently, shifting back into the touch.

*Love you and you love me*, Ranboo thinks sleepily, tipping his head so their foreheads are resting together, *cariads unified pair*, easily sliding back into unconsciousness' warm embrace, knowing he's safe and cared for, nestled in the arms of the person that's going to always love him no matter what.

Ranboo can't say how long he dozes for, but he doesn't think it's long, roused from where he's floating bathed in sunlight by rapid fire knocking at the door, Cissan's voice jumping fast and nervous in Apian, gets Tubbo to lurch upright, scrambling out of the hammock before Ranboo can even *ask*.

"Bo, wha's-?"

"Time to go, Boo, get your shit." Tubbo calls hurriedly, stuffing any loose clothing into his duffle without much care, and Ranboo rolls out of the hammock immediately, lands on shaky knees but stays upright, trips over to his own stuff and jumps at the next round of frantic knocking.

"Festta!" Tubbo yells, slings his duffle over his shoulder and scoops his boots up in a free hand, jerks the door open, and around him, Ranboo catches snatches of Cissan in a nightgown, hair undone and set of hands fiddling with it nervously as she says, "They're early, melli, you have to *go*."

All of Ranboo's hair stands on end, tail poofing out because he *understands* now, *enforcers*, snatches his own boots up in one hand and twists to his feet, darting quick to stand behind Tubbo, soft touch at his shoulder to let him know he's ready. Tubbo doesn't turn to look at him, but his antenna flick, *know you're there*, as he asks Cissan desperately, "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes, now go, amica mea, everyone will keep them as long as they can, but *you need to go*." Cissan insists, reaching out to drag him into a quick hug, their antenna only brushing the barest amount before she's pulling back, looking at Tubbo teary eyed, "I'm so sorry, melli, I'm so sorry we can't do more."

"Don't apologize, it's my fault an-" Tubbo stops himself, shrinks down at the furious, heartbreaking expression Cissan gives him, relents, "I-It's just how things are right now, b-but I'll figure something out ama, *promise*."

She cups his cheek with one of her hands, and Ranboo really feels like he's intruding, cuts his eyes away to give them some privacy, still hears how watery her voice is though, "I know. You're smart, Bo, you'll figure it out. N-Now get out of here, melli."

"Amote, ama." Ranboo winces at how destroyed Tubbo sounds, can't stop himself glancing back to check on him, watches him scrub a hand into his eyes, Cissan sniffing hard, "Etiam amote. Andare."

She steps back and gives Tubbo one last pat on the arm as he darts by, headed for the front door with Ranboo hot on his heels, and he waits behind Tubbo's shoulder as he peers out the window, checking the street out front for a bright flash of blue uniforms and sleek white plasma rifles, adrenaline snaking through his body and forcing him to wake up more.

There's a gentle touch at Ranboo's arm, and he glances over his shoulder, sees Cissan smiling sadly at him with tear tracks on her face, and he spins around, not sure what to do, stands there with his free hand hovering awkwardly. She doesn't take her hand off him just yet, squeezes his forearm very lightly, bright shape of her fingers curled around him burning itself into his memory, "I'm so glad I finally got to meet you crurito, please stay safe, a-and keep watching out for my boy, o-okay?"

"Of course." Ranboo promises immediately, only waivers slightly as he dips down to give her a one armed hug, makes sure to keep his horn away from her antenna and his claws from her wings, "I- thank you so much, Cissan. I-I'm going to um- g-going to mi-"

"Boo, we gotta go." Tubbo rushes over him, wrenching the door open, and Ranboo drops his arm, turns away from Cissan with one final wave as he runs barefoot after Tubbo out into the early morning light, something flying loosely around his knees, only then realizing what he still has on and stalls, yelling, "The skirt!"

"Keep it!" Cissan calls from the open doorway, waving his concern off with a set of hands and a bright smile that tints incredibly fond when he opens his mouth to argue, "It suits you, crurito! Now get outta here!"



Ranboo isn't given a chance to respond, a hand and callouses he'd know anywhere wrapping around his wrist that tugs him forwards sharply, gets him moving again, stumbling behind Tubbo as they race down the red dirt road, kicking up a cloud of dust that hangs long after them. They're not going down into Avelare, are skirting the top of the hill instead, but Ranboo chances a look, anger sizzling through his veins seeing the pearly white speeders parked in the square, the cluster of people surrounding them, wishes he had his blaster on him.

*Fuck you you shouldn't be here leave these people alone what I wouldn't give for five minutes and a plasma rifle steady hands good shot don't stand a chance*

Eventually they run out of road, and Tubbo flies up and over the top of someone's house, Ranboo half a second behind, fizzing into existence right as Tubbo looks back for him, sharp grin tugging his lips up as he heads off again, looping through fields of long grasses back to where they landed the Eshachi.

Anxiety curls sharp under Ranboo's skin, but it's nothing bad, it's more excited than anything else, hot swell of anticipation in his chest, through his ribs, knowing they're trying to avoid getting caught, that someone's going to be on their heels looking for them, *heady rush of knowing they're not going to get them too slow too late not good enough never good enough to catch you two.*

Ranboo bounds through the yellow green prairie, skirt snapping around his knees, feet moving fast under him, muscles bunching and contracting, propelling him forwards, warm wind in his hair and striking against his face, smiles wild and with too many teeth, chasing after Tubbo's back, with his gossamer wings and mess of erratic curls, slightly mad cackles flying out to get lost in the brilliant blue sky.

*I've got your back and you've got mine*, Ranboo thinks as they clatter up the cargo ramp, Tubbo hurling his stuff in a corner before he scrambles up the ladder chute, *it's you and me and me and you*, he knows, dropping down in his chair across from Tubbo, gets the weapon systems up, just in case, *I love you*, smiles at where Tubbo's bouncing in his seat, excess adrenaline making him jumpy, *and somehow somehow you love me too*, and he cuts his eyes across to Ranboo as they take off, everything he's ever wanted smiling back at him, *and I wouldn't have it any other way cariad, husband of mine.*

## Chapter End Notes

Off to a banging start if I do say so myself. Honestly didn't think this monster was going to get as long as it did, and it's the first chapter and I still have so much to get through, so updates may be a little slow but! More monster chapters await.

Come scream at me on [twitter](#)!

See you soon!

-Hellen



# Mantle

## Chapter Notes

Hi I know it's been a while, but this monster was a labor of love and I'm happy with the way it turned out <3

Enjoy!

Please mind tags! They and the rating are there for a reason.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo's been writing and rewriting the script he wants to use for over a week now, thought he had it finalized around four AM, felt pretty confident this morning even, when Tubbo got up and mumbled something about showering, stumbling out of their dorm like he was still half asleep.

But as soon as the door swished shut behind him, and Ranboo hurriedly fished the silvery bead out from its hiding place, all of his excitement evaporated and it felt like nerves swallowed him whole, left him a shaking twitching mess, made his fingers go rigid around the shape of the bead.

*What's wrong with you you were so excited a minute ago why are you nervous now,* he berates himself, hunched over in his bunk rolling the tungsten bead around in his fingers, knee jiggling furiously from pent up anxiety, *this is supposed to be a fun thing supposed to be something you enjoy and you're just ruining it but that's nothing new all you do isn't it little brother-*

Hanging his head with a groan, Ranboo shifts the bead into one palm and uses the other to massage at his forehead, does nothing to stop Reshaa's voice simpering, *aw what's wrong, head bothering you? Well...can't say I'm not surprised-*

*Can you just- go away? I'm busy,* he snaps, but she only laughs, a high, ringing sound like metal striking metal, like blades clashing out in the courtyard, has never been warm, has never been nice, and her claws dig into his shoulder as she leans over him, *oooh, is that for him?*

Ranboo refuses to answer her, rolls the bead between two fingers and holds it up, watching the light catch on the silvery metal and hair thin engravings, the ones he spent days agonizing over, finally settled on a design he thought wasn't half bad, but now, he's doubting himself.

*Simplified outline of the Eshachi because of what it means to him, freedom and family and his home, moonflowers because of her that you see in him, hexagons for his heritage, used tungsten because it's less conductive and he does so much electrical work but what if he*

*thinks it's cheap what if he hates the designs what if it's not good enough what if what if what if-*

Stomach churning with sudden nausea thinking that Tubbo's going to be back soon, he doesn't have *time* to do anything about the bead, either give it to him or wait and make another, *needs to figure out something*, and Ranboo curls the bead out of sight, hair bristling as Reshaa coos, *you made it yourself? How cute...it's perfect for him then, plain, unfortunate, and ugly, just like T-!*

Ranboo sees red, doesn't think, whips around fast with a fist cocked back and slams it into the plastisteel wall, hisses through his teeth as pain explodes across his knuckles, thankfully hasn't split any of them open when he pulls his hand away.

"You shut your *fucking mouth*." Ranboo pants harshly in furious anger, flexes the fingers on his right hand out, but curls them back into a fist, wishes he had a proper target to *hit*, "Don't you *ever* talk about him like that."

Silence is the only reply he gets, *because of course it is there's no one here but him get a grip*, and Ranboo sighs, flops back on his bunk with his legs hanging limply on the floor, throws an arm over his eyes and tries to calm down.

*Think about sunlight on your skin and rough callouses against your hands*, and he does with a deep inhale, lets it out and, *remember waking up next to him the way he turned into you how he looked at you when he told you he loved you*, and his muscles begin to unwind, steady calm seeping in like the slow heat from sunbaked rocks and, *it's okay just ask him when he comes back you love him and he loves you and it'll be okay*, and Ranboo shifts his arm away, blinks his eyes open.

"It's...going to be okay." He whispers quietly to himself, hands folding together gently on his chest, fingertips twisting to press over where his heart rests, gets caught up feeling the steady drumming of it, like the underscoring beat to a complicated song. Rapping his fingers in time to it, Ranboo's eyes lose focus staring up at the warm grey of the ceiling overhead, tiny, glow in the dark stars peppered here and there.

They make up actual constellations because of course they do, Tubbo would never settle for anything less, but they're not one's Ranboo grew up with, instead, are shapes that grace the skies of Apidae, and from the back of his mind, warm summer wind blows, smooth, barely remembered winding words trickling their way out like honey wine into ceramic mugs.

*People always say the Queens of ages past are up there*, cool grass tickling at the back of his neck, fire bright hand in his, *that their wings turn into nebula and their bodies return to the stars*, head a thousand lightyears away, lost in a haze, somewhere out there with the Queens, *maybe that's why I've always liked it better being out there*, blinding grins and warm hearts and arms welcoming him in, like each of them has a piece of a sun burning brilliantly in them too, *maybe it's where I've always belonged*.

*Take me with you*, Ranboo mouths along to himself, sees in his mind how Tubbo smiles, the way his head tips from the stars to face his, but it's like the night sky goes with him, bright

pinpricks of light settling in his eyes, moonlight under his skin, the entire universe in his smile as he whispers, *thought I'd meet you there, stelledore.*

The door hisses open then and Ranboo sits up fast, dark spots swimming across his vision and has to throw a hand back, lightheaded to the point that he misses the first half of whatever Tubbo's talking about, only catches, "-the fuck out man and like, a movie day sounds *great.*"

"Yeah sure okay." Ranboo says on autopilot, used to agreeing with most things Tubbo suggests, doesn't think he's signed up for anything bad when Tubbo grins and starts messing with the holo-screen in their room. His hair is all fluffed up from the sonic shower, kinda looks like one of those puffy white flowers Ranboo remembers from the fields of Apidae but never got the name of, and the tungsten bead in his hand suddenly weighs as much as a white dwarf star.

*Just ask him open your mouth and let the words fall out stop overthinking and just do it, but Ranboo's tongue refuses to cooperate, strangling what he wants to say before it can even leave his throat, pulse roaring in his ears like the wind up on the parapets, claws biting into his palm where they lock up around the bead, not supposed to be an ordeal you wanted to do this have been thinking about it for a week why are you scared it's not supposed to be like this just open your say something speak evenly stop stuttering you incompetent-*

"So I was thinking maybe we start with this movie George lent me-"

*-I'm trying I'm trying I'm trying but I'm scared what if he says no what if he doesn't want to-*

*"-it's from his planet but he made this program that translates everything-"*

*-why are you always like this stop overthinking can't never can brain goes so fast all the time can't get it to stop there's no off there's only on and it's all the time-*

"-which is really neat, but yeah, the movie's about like, some kid that gets cursed by a circus witch into being an adult? Sounded interesting but what do you think?"

*-just ask him worst he can do is say no exactly and then I'm left with this bead and a hole punched through my chest don't know unless you ask he could say yes and then you'd get to see your bead in his hair-* and Ranboo's heart lurches at the thought, Tubbo just finishing his question as Ranboo spits out in a rush, *"CanIbraidyourhair?"*

He worries it wasn't understandable with the way Tubbo pauses, but before he can muster up the courage to try again, one of Tubbo's hands flits up to his hair and pulls it out to the side, "Uh, sure? Do you think it's long enough though?"

It's not exactly the response Ranboo was hoping for, but it's also not the one he was dreading, and he shrugs, darting his eyes away so he doesn't have to watch if Tubbo's face contorts into something unpleasant, "I-I think so, but um- b-but if you don't- don't uh, *w-want* t-to that's fine, I just- ya'know, um, I-I- uh, it's yeah, just-"

The bed dips next to him, and Ranboo twists sharply, all the moisture leaving his mouth seeing Tubbo so close, *endless starfield eyes and a sun burning in his smile*, shivers when one of Tubbo's hands drops over his, just happens to be the one holding the bead like a lifeline, "Then sure! Like- *all* of it or...?"

"J-Just a section." Ranboo has to clear his throat, voice thick with emotion as he brings a shaking hand up to tap next to his ear, "Um- just o-on the left, uh, behind your e-ear. It'd be um, small, n-not super intrusive, b-but it's okay if y-you don't w-want me to."

"Yeah, no, sounds great. Here lemme just..." Tubbo says, turning around so his back is to Ranboo, wings flickering ever so slightly, tilts his head and asks over a shoulder, "This good?"

And it's very real all of a sudden, Ranboo's hands starting to shake like mad, never in his entire life thought he'd be sitting here, with a cariad bead *he* etched in his hands, getting ready to braid someone's hair for the first time, whispers hoarsely, "Y-Yeah."

*What are the odds fucking astronomical*, he thinks in a daze, scooting forward until he's hovering right behind Tubbo, fishes the ebony comb and elastic ties out of his pocket and takes a steadying breath, *but here I am and here he is and it's okay it's allowed I can do this*.

Ranboo's never done this before on someone, but every child on Annwyl learns the pattern of cariad braids young, hoards loose bits of string and twists them together, daydreaming about their life partners. He stopped practicing about the time he jumped- um... a-about that time a few years back, but his hands would remember the pattern even if his mind didn't, comb out a section gently so it'll lay flat when he's done and not stick out sloppily.

*Split into three even pieces and a fourth smaller for the Four Guiding Lights*, fingers trembling skimming through Tubbo's hair, get the pieces sectioned off, *over under tucked through there repeat the pattern be gentle don't tug*, and there's no one to speak the words, but Ranboo recites them in his mind dutifully, knows he'd butcher them if he tried to talk right now.

*Let this braid be a symbol of my commitment to you*, it starts coming together, strands of hair woven into a pattern that's seemed out of reach for so long, *like how my love for you is threaded throughout my entire being*, and Tubbo's hair isn't very long, but it doesn't matter, Ranboo holding the braid together with one hand, *like how our lives will be woven together*, uses the sharp tips of his claws to thread the bead over the end, ties it off with the tiny elastics, *I am forever yours no matter what comes, to you, I promise this*.

Ranboo runs his fingers adoringly down the little braid, careful not to muss it up, rubs his thumb along the tungsten bead, hair thin markings he stayed up long nights carving, and lets it slip out of his hand, falling to rest neatly behind Tubbo's ear. Now that he's done, Tubbo lifts one of his hands and gently feels along it, fingers lingering on the bead as he asks curiously, "What's this for?"

"It's for you." Ranboo says softly, quick jolt running through him then because he realizes he forgot *to show Tubbo the bead before he put it in stupid stupid idiot how could you forget*

*moron incompetent*, rushes to explain, “I-I um, I-I-I made it, it uh, i-it has the Eshachi on it for- ya’know, a-and hexagons for um, for A-Apidae and then moonflowers for m-me-”

Tubbo twists around so he’s facing Ranboo fully, flash of tungsten catching in the dimmed lights overhead and Ranboo almost starts crying, *my bead my bead on his braid my braid my cariad my husband-*

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, sorry I wasn’t trying to- make you self conscious?” Tubbo says, reaching out and threading their fingers together, drawing careful shapes over the back of Ranboo’s knuckles, deep blue eyes fixed directly on his, “I love it, thank you for making me something. It...it was really sweet of you.”

“Of course.” Ranboo murmurs thickly, eyes keep drifting back to where the bead is only just visible around the side of Tubbo’s ear, interlocking shape of the braid nearly lost in his mess of dark curls, but Ranboo knows it’s there and *Tubbo* knows it’s there and that’s all that matters.

“Do you want me to...braid yours?” Tubbo asks hesitantly, like he’s nervous too, and he’s only ever asked that in Ranboo’s most painful daydreams, but this time he’s a physical thing, not see through. He’s here, *he’s real*, sitting across from Ranboo, knees touching and leaching warm heat, *Ranboo’s* braid tucked behind his ear, and Ranboo *does* start crying now, sniffling harshly as he croaks, “Yes please.”

They sit side by side with their legs pressed together and Ranboo shows Tubbo how to do the braid on some spare scraps of cording, dopily fond smile melting onto his face watching Tubbo try his hand at it for the first time, that intense look he gets when he’s working on the Eshachi settling on his face, little furrow in his brow, tips their heads together and purrs deep in his chest.

“Wait-” Tubbo says, hands dropping the section of cording he was working on, *almost got it so close so smart incredible amazing love you*, looks at Ranboo slightly concerned, “Wait, do I like- did I need to-? I uh, I don’t have a um, a bead thing for you?”

Ranboo giggles sweetly, wraps a comforting hand around one of Tubbo’s because the nerves must really be getting to him then, to forget something as simple as this, “No no, you didn’t need to, I have my mother’s.”

“Oh...oh!” Tubbo’s eyebrows shoot up, probably just remembered how the tradition goes, *a new bead for a new love and a parent’s bead for the blessings of a long love*, and since Ranboo’s the only one who’d have a cariad bead from one of his parents, it makes sense that’d he make one for Tubbo. *Didn’t think he’d be so nervous so confident most other times kinda sweet that he’s all worked up*, Ranboo thinks, taking his hand back so Tubbo can quick practice one more time, nails a sloppy, but decent looking cariad braid.

And then it’s Ranboo’s turn, Tubbo sitting behind him as Ranboo’s heart thunders wildly in his chest, passes back the ebony comb and little elastics, hesitates briefly before giving over his most carefully guarded possession, *never let anyone else touch it but it’s okay it’s okay if its him*, fingers shaking as they drop his mother’s cariad bead in Tubbo’s waiting hand. It’s really quiet while Tubbo works, fire bright fingers trailing sparks across Ranboo’s scalp

where they brush past sometimes, and he has to start over a few times, grumbling under his breath as he gently combs Ranboo's hair back out.

"Sorry..." He mumbles after a third failed attempt, and Ranboo swishes his tail up, flicking the end of it along his arms, sighs feeling a set of Tubbo's fingers comb absentmindedly through the plume, tenderly murmuring, "Don't apologize, take your time, Bo."

Ranboo doesn't mind that it's taking him longer anyway, because it's really wonderfully actually, having Tubbo's hands in his hair, and he slits his eyes closed with pleasure, tipping back into the contact, rumbling in his chest as Tubbo has to right his head, chuckling softly, "Feel nice, huh?"

"Mmm hmm." Ranboo hums, not really paying attention, slumps forwards bonelessly when a pair of hands sink into his hair, scratching along his scalp and gently detangling as they go. They're so *warm* it makes Ranboo sleepy, which is weird considering he slept a few days ago and should still be good, but he finds himself starting to nod off, unhappy sound huffing out of him when Tubbo pulls back unexpectedly.

"Do you wanna nap and I can finish your braid later?" Tubbo asks right behind his ear, amusement slipping in under his words, and Ranboo whines, tipping his head back to thud gently into Tubbo's face, "Noooo, fiiiiiniissh."

"Well then wake up sleepy head." Tubbo laughs, pushing him back upright and Ranboo goes with a series of dramatic noises, pries his eyes open and forces them to stay that way as Tubbo has to comb out the section again. *Wonder what his bead would've looked like for me if he confessed first*, Ranboo thinks, half smile on his face as his head bobs to the side, weighed down by exhaustion and a hand comes up to right it, *probably would've put cats on it or shorts or something else silly*.

Tubbo finally gets it on his next try, excited little noise of victory falling out of his mouth as his fingers dart fast through Ranboo's hair. They weave the strands together with the same precision and dexterity he uses with the delicate wiring of the Eshachi, and it's not long before Ranboo feels a little tug, throat clogging with emotion as hands ruffle through the rest of his hair, Tubbo chipperly declaring, "There! All done, Boo."

Reaching a hand up, Ranboo can't believe it, ghosting his fingertips over the braid, hardly daring to touch it, like he's afraid it'll disappear out from under his touch same as mist evaporating in the light of day, but it stays put. It's firm and real and kinda lumpy in places, but *Tubbo's* the one who did it so it's absolutely perfect, and his fingers stutter, getting to the bead at the bottom, wrap reflexively around it.

*So talented so smart my pride my joy my littlest always remember I care for you that I'll never really leave you remember me darling promise Ranboo promise you'll keep me in your heart always*

*You never left*, he whispers, turning to look back at Tubbo and sees *her* out of the corner of his right eye, eyes glowing like the auroras that dance in the sky over Annwyl, and when she smiles, it scrunches up her entire face, shimmering hand reaching out like she's going to



comb through his hair, *so grown up my son you look so lovely so proud of you always told you you'd find your way.*

"I-Is it okay? I um, I can try again if you want..." Tubbo asks sheepishly, ducking his head while one of his hands rubs awkwardly at his neck, others all finding something else to fiddle with, rolling the comb around between fingers or accidentally slinging small elastics across the room.

Ranboo snaps his gaze to him and leans forwards, both of his hands falling to Tubbo's lower set, laces their fingers together and tugs until he'll make eye contact, whispers sweet and loving like the wind on Apidae, "It's perfect, thank you so much. I-I love you."

"I love you too." Tubbo murmurs and it's always such a headrush, hearing him say it back, and it hits Ranboo then that that's it, *it's official*, they're life partners in all the ways that matter. He can't help it when he ducks his head down, hyper aware of the new, barely there weight tucked behind his ear as he brings their foreheads together, regrettably has to drop Tubbo's hands so he can cup his face.

*It's you and me cariad*, Ranboo thinks, thumbs sweeping out in careful arcs under Tubbo's eyes, *never going to leave you never would have*, purrs like crazy feeling Tubbo's antenna drag along his horn, tries to dip and nuzzle into the contact even though it never really works, *until the end of time Tubbo until the end of the universe I'll love you always.*

Used to be when they had movie days, Tubbo would suspend the floating holo-screen between their two bunks and Ranboo'd spend the entire time trying not to think about Tjhia-Yuet, but now, when Tubbo gets up, Ranboo loops a hand around one of his wrists, looks at him beseechingly until he gets it, grinning slow and fond as he pulls the screen over to Ranboo's bunk.

The bed's not really wide enough for them both to lay on comfortably, but Ranboo wiggles back against the wall and drags Tubbo into him, legs tangling together to save space, Tubbo's head tucked neatly under his chin, back pressed against his chest. For lack of anywhere else to put his arm, Ranboo hesitantly drapes it across Tubbo's abdomen, tries to draw it back when he shivers, but Tubbo won't let him, fingers encircling his wrist like a vice.

"S-Sorry...I-I know I'm um- really cold c-compared to you." Ranboo apologizes haltingly but stops trying to pull away, only relents because Tubbo's *not relenting*, and settles his arm back, though he does feel bad about it.

*Probably freezing for him not comfortable at all no one wants to deal with that suggest a blanket or something*, Ranboo worries, tail flicking where it's loosely coiled around their legs, and Tubbo angles his head until he can mock glare at him, eyebrow arched high on his face, "Dude. How have you *not* figured this out by now? I *like* how cold you are."

"W-What- wait- *what?*" Ranboo stammers, ears jumping up in surprise, and Tubbo snorts, close enough that Ranboo can see his irises roll in the dark blue of his eyes, "Queens I *swear*- I like the cold, er- I guess *chill* is a better word, but yeah, you're like, the perfect temperature, s' nice. Um...i-it's really uh- *comforting*? F-For me at least..."

*What are the fucking odds astronomical luckiest idiot in the galaxy*, Ranboo thinks a bit flabbergasted, watches as Tubbo's eyes suddenly blow wide like he's just realized something, "Wait, wait- if you're cold to me, am I like? *Burning up* for you? *S-Shit*, are you uncomfortable, should I move-?"

He sits up and Ranboo's arm tightens, pulls him back down, tail curling just a tad tighter, every point they're touching searing like the buffeting summer sun, seeping down deep into his skin, all the way to his bones, and maybe for another Ender it'd be uncomfortable, but not for him, has always loved the warm licks of *feeling* that help remind him he's alive.

"I like the heat." Ranboo murmurs, fingers stroking languorously along the inside of one of Tubbo's forearms, fingertips singeing and prickling with the light of a sun, wonders what it feels like for him, *chilly sweep of frost instead something he likes said it's comforting*, and Tubbo tips his head back, smiles cheekily, "Well, I guess we're perfect for each other then."

They watch the movie from George's planet, but Ranboo could not tell you a single thing about it, too caught up feeling Tubbo's abdomen jump under his arm in laughter, in the way his antenna twitch and wiggle in response to his reactions, clean, earthy scent to his hair, heat he radiates making Ranboo lightheaded, absolutely lost in the thought that for the first time in his life, he's finally perfect to someone.

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### **Lesson Thirty: Keeping up appearances is the only thing that matters**

The stupid boots are too tight and keep pinching his toes but Ranboo doesn't fidget or squirm at all, stands there with a bland expression on his face and hands clasped behind his back, lets the servants fuss over him without a single complaint.

At least until some handmaid sticks him with the pin of a brooch she's trying to attach to his tunic and his eye twitches, *intentional or accident no had to have done it on purpose trying to trip you up ruin your big day maybe she's one of Reshaa's*, and frozen fire races through his veins, raises all his hackles even though he tries to control his reactions.

"Do you have a name?" Ranboo coos sweetly to the girl before she leaves with the others, and she jumps, *nervous then what about know I'm on to her anxiety stricken use that to your advantage*, eyes darting around the room quick, *looking for an accomplice perhaps what were you told to do to say who're you working for*, and Ranboo continues in that saccharine voice, "Your *better* is speaking to you, you're supposed to answer."

She cowers back from him despite being older despite being taller, and it gives Ranboo a headrush, makes him feel like *he's* the one holding the riding crop, like *he's* the one with the Daysetter crown or Moontide circlet, like he's big and impressive and *noticeable*, but still, *she won't answer him*.

*Too scared to respond good should be or maybe she's just ignoring you like everyone else making you look like an idiot making you look dumb shadow on the wall no one sees you-* fingers spasming, Ranboo levels a sharp glare at her, tips his chin back and snaps, "That wasn't a request, *peasant*."

“A-Attai, m-my name is Attai.” She whispers, ducking her head, breaking eye contact *like it's not even worth it to look at him and what does she know WHAT DOES SHE KNOW*, and his fingers ache and tingle and *burn* with frostbite as Ranboo tips his head to look at her, *forcers her to look at him I'm here RIGHT HERE STOP IGNORING ME-* “Aw, how pretty. Is it a family name?”

“Y-Yes-”

“So named after your mother I take it.” Ranboo says like he cares at all, watches the handmaid nod her head and dart her eyes away fast like she's looking for someone, *that accomplice whoever's after you assassins Reshaa kidnappers or she just thinks you're not worth her time bitch how dare she PAY ATTENTION TO ME-* and his hands tighten behind his back, “How quaint. Attai? Can I request a favor from you?”

“Of course, your highness.” She says even though she sounds like she doesn't mean it, still refusing to meet his gaze *refusing to acknowledge him like he's a little shadow on the wall always scurrying around out of sight no one would care if you disappear GO AWAY*, and Ranboo wants to scream, keeps it locked away down his throat as he asks instead, “There's a ring of mine I'd like to wear, but I forgot it back in my chambers, would you go fetch it for me? It's on the vanity in an ebony box.”

*Lie*, it's not his but he's been saving it for a while now, letting Count Qroyan's frustrations build to the point of frothing murder, and it may be overkill, but the dressing room is pulsating around Ranboo in time to the furious drumming of his heart. *Don't you ever look down on me like that again don't you EVER ignore me again*, he seethes while, ever the dutiful little mouse, Attai nods her head, fleeing out of the room with Ranboo murmuring to her back, “Be quick about it, the ball starts soon.”

*There, that should ensure she doesn't speak to anyone on her way*, Ranboo snarls, straightens the brooch she so horribly pinned on with trembling fingers, shakes them out discreetly to try and dispel the spasms but they won't stop. *Don't feel good room's swaying feel sick feel lightheaded don't wanna do this want to leave want mam- Get. A. Grip*, he snaps at himself, forces his body completely still and chokes whatever that feeling is out, head buzzing and grey by the time someone else comes to check on him.

“They're ready for you in the antechamber, your highness.” The manservant says, bowing low and Ranboo sweeps past him without a second look, *princes don't acknowledge those beneath them then why won't anyone acknowledge you- shut. up-* uncomfortable boot heels clicking on the polished black stone, cape flowing out in his wake.

As he's leaving the dressing room, he spots the head maidservant, looking a little harried as she tries to be subtle about looking around for something- *someone* -and Ranboo pauses, gets her attention with a nonchalant, “Oh, if you're looking for...oh...what's her name, *Attai*, she complained to not be feeling well so I sent her on her way.”

The head maidservant's reaction is instant and just what he was wanting, bristling with indignation that one of her charges has slipped off, fury that's not for him lighting up her eyes as she cuts a deep courtesy to Ranboo, claws threatening at the hem of her skirts, “Thank you greatly, your highness.”

*Caught shirking her work and in a place she shouldn't be with something she shouldn't have, Ranboo fights the flick of his tail, sickening streak of pride snarling warm in his gut, strides out of the dressing room with all the elegance and deadly grace of a sandstorm blowing off the wastes, and with Qroyan as incensed as he is, she's not getting out of it most likely outcome being execution-*

Ranboo falters a bit but hopefully does a good job masking it, thinks he hears the faintest slip of a laugh from somewhere behind him and tips his chin up and *dares* any of them to say something to his face. *Shut up all of you shut up stop talking about me stop making fun of me do you have ANY idea who I am what I could do to you*, but his heart is skipping fast and nauseous in his chest, regret and guilt over what he did warring inside, but it wasn't *his fault!*

That cur was working for Reshaa o-or he *thinks* she is, but m-maybe she's not, *but she still was ignoring you wouldn't answer you when you spoke*, or she was just nervous, couldn't find the words, and he knows how horrible that feels, *no no she refused to meet your eyes acted like you weren't there no one cares little shadow phantom of a person you're not there*, maybe she was nice but he doesn't know he d-doesn't know, *got what she deserved how dare she*, n-no...no- NO- what have you done what have you done what *have you done-*

*Ancients*, it feels like his head is going to explode or he's going to throw up, and Ranboo can't clap his hands over his ears to block it all out like he wants, has to keep going, *has to remain blank*. Only thing he can think to do is mentally picture taking all of these things he doesn't want to feel, *guilt and regret and loathing*, and slamming a door in their face, cut it off from everything else.

And it works surprisingly well, Ranboo blinking back to himself somewhere in the hall of portraits that lines the way to the main ballroom, grey static in his head but he'll take it, anything besides- ~~*fear and terror and clawing anxiety going to swallow you alive-*~~ *that*.

He just so happens to be going past the painting of his parents, their cariad braids prominent in their hair, mother looking healthier than Ranboo ever saw, father about the same, less silver in his dark locks, but same stony cast to his face, standing behind her with a hand clasped over her shoulder.

A memory from a few hours ago rushes through Ranboo, skin still sort of tingling where a broad hand spread out, father bent down to his level, making direct eye contact as he straightened Ranboo's circlet with his other hand, fingers lingering a fraction longer than protocol dictated on his temple before he stood back up.

*Tonight is important, the entire court will be watching*, he'd said in that deep, monotone voice, but Ranboo doesn't think he was imagining the adoring light in his eyes, something that could maybe be called *pride* and he breaks out in shivers now, reliving the last thing father told him, *remember what you've learned, everything Meleeri's taught you, and don't deviate from that do you understand me Ranboo-*

*He said my name he looked at me he placed his hand on my shoulder touched my face he cares he cares I knew he did*, and Ranboo stands up a little straighter, throws his shoulders back and stares up at the portrait of his father, the unseeing eyes that earlier were real and

looking at *him*, thinks determinedly, *I'll show you father I'll give you a reason to be proud of me I can behave I know how I'm good and I'll show you so you'll want to look at me again.*

The procession comes to a stop outside the entrance to the ballroom, massive set of double doors inlaid with end crystals that catch and shine in the gold embellishments, and they're closed for now, but the distant sound of music and voices laughing eek out through the cracks. Ranboo curls his pinched toes until they hurt a little, apprehension coiling under his skin because this is it, once those doors open, the *entire court* is going to be watching him, *assessing judging whispering have to be on your best behavior remember what you were taught.*

He'll be a proper adult after tonight, father will bestow him his permanent circlet, and Ranboo won't have to wear the juvenile one anymore, *it's not just about that you'll be a man then expected to keep up the appearance of the family do not falter do not waiver do not disgrace them do your duty.*

*Yes ma'am*, Ranboo answers her without fail, likes to think he sees her smile at him, rare occurrence that it is, and his ears flick, can hear them introducing him through the door, takes one last steadying breath that he holds in his lungs, uses it to force out the nerves zinging under his skin and slips his mask into place as the doors boom open, takes that first step onto what feels like center stage.

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"Okay how 'bout this one?"

"Mmmm...no, it sounds like more trouble than it's worth. I mean- we have to break into a chemical plant *and* pick them up Spacebucks? I don't think so."

"Okay, okay, fair enough...what about this one? Arms deal?"

"Last time we did one of those we got shorted two hundred credits."

"Oh right, fuck those guys...aaaah, I dunno, anything jumping out at you?" Tubbo asks, rocking back on his heels and Ranboo cranes his head up, fingers drumming against the side of his face as he reads the mission board fast.

It's busy today, cycling quick through a bunch of options all in a variety of categories, but his brain knows which ones to filter for, *nothing red or orange assassinations or extractions look for green for yellow arms deals and covert missions and acquisitions*, eyes skimming over an acquisition that seems promising, *good payout explosives involved sounds fun Tubbo would like it*, but as soon as he points it out, it flashes off the screen.

"Ha! Gotta be faster on the uptake there, cowpoke!" A voice laughs from a few feet away, and Ranboo turns to see who- *Dwayne, gregarious and loud, unidentified species but likely from the Piul sector given his bipedal build, a bit...odd*, and the man tips his cowboy hat in their direction, "Thought you could teleport, End boy!"

Ranboo's tail snaps behind him in irritation, *calm down he doesn't mean anything just teasing is he though stay on your toes shut up relax*, and without looking at him, Tubbo flips Dwayne off with his left hands, calling happily, "Screw you jackass."

"Aw, don't be like that, ya'know it's the slow cowherd that misses his mornin' vittles, bee's knees." Dwayne says like that makes *any* sense, but he's grinning and that means Tubbo probably is as well, so Ranboo relaxes a little, still keeps a wary eye on Dwayne and his partner as they head off from the crowd, blinks in confusion when the cowboy winks at him.

"That man is very odd." Ranboo quietly mutters so only Tubbo will hear, and he snorts, head tipped to the side while he squints at the ever rotating missions board, "Tell me about it, I swear he's got space madness or something, moron doesn't think planets are spherical."

"W-Wait, wha-? No, you know what, I believe it." Ranboo sighs because honestly, everyone here is a little space mad, but it's not a bad thing, it's kind of nice actually, makes Ranboo feel like he sticks out less. There's not a single person here that isn't odd in their own way, Dwayne thinks planets are flat, Sapnap only eats the outside of most fruit, Tubbo falls asleep in the weirdest places, Ozzi exists, and then there's Ranboo, with his specters and endless list of neurosis and maze of doors.

*Sounds like someone's found his place in the freakshow*, simpers from behind him, but it... doesn't carry as much bite as it has in the past. Ranboo can tune her out easily, is actually half tempted to turn around and meet her head on, but he *knows* there's no one there so he doesn't, that he'd only see the bustling main hub of HQ.

The specters always put him a little on edge though, make him hyper aware of his actions, so it's kinda unfortunate timing, but someone stepping past behind Ranboo accidentally brushes close enough that it makes all of his hair stand up, and he inches closer to Tubbo, paranoia simmering under his skin.

Crowds have made him nervous ever since he was little, never knew who was waiting for you in the crush of bodies, because it was drilled into Ranboo's head from the time he could walk, *never present your back don't give them an opening kill you if they get a chance*, bred the sort of panic and neurotic vigilance that kept most of the younglings alive.

And realistically, Ranboo *knows* no one here wants to kill him, *didn't either on Annwyl you were beyond useless not worth the time*, but he can't stop the instinctual response. Shuffling into Tubbo's personal space helps, used to come with the drawback of uneasy guilt but it doesn't anymore, and Ranboo kinda likes having the excuse to be nearer, to feel the heat he radiates.

*Cariad you're here I'm okay you're here*, curls like languorous solar flares in Ranboo's mind, eyes darting over to catch a glimpse of Tubbo's braid, a little messy from where he's slept in it but still orderly enough, tungsten bead shining in the lights overhead.

*I'll have to redo it soon*, Ranboo thinks, humming softly in the back of this throat, tail waving slowly at the sense memory of Tubbo's hands in his hair, gets drug out of it very rudely by Tubbo elbowing him in his side harshly, "Oh! Oh! Boo! What about that one, yellow, third one down and over uuuuh...one? N-No, two!"

Ranboo dutifully moves his eyes to where Tubbo's talking about, skims it- *artifact acquisition from local ruins on Bosnoir, place on the verge of collapse so time is of the essence, contact unclear on how to enter the temple bit of a mystery* -and he trills in interest because it sounds exciting for *him*, but looks down at Tubbo confused, "Are you sure, doesn't seem like your kinda thing?"

"I know but it's *your* kinda thing." Tubbo stresses, wide, happy smile on his face that makes Ranboo's heart do funny things which he's pretty sure hearts aren't supposed to do, and he has to swallow past the lump in throat, voice still thick when he says, "Y-You don't have to do that for *me*."

"It's not like I'd hate it, and I *want* to do it anyway. I like doing nice things for you, Boo." Tubbo says with a shrug, and they're out in public and people probably aren't, but Ranboo can't shake the feeling that everyone is *staring at him judging and whispering behind flicking fans*, stops him from wrapping his tail around Tubbo like he wants to.

*When has anyone ever told you they wanted to do something for you, easy, he knows and the answer is never, done nothing in your life to warrant him incredibly lucky have to be incredibly careful, he gets it okay, treading on thin ground, have to be mindful or he'll go crashing through a weak point into caverns deep below, one slip up one mistake and you're going to lose him have to be on your best behavior know how to behave I can be good.*

"You do enough for me as is, Bo, pick something you'd like." Ranboo murmurs, and it's true, Tubbo does more for him than anyone else ever has, *looks at you talks to you takes you places acts like you matter somehow loves you*, and if *that* isn't a dizzying thought, but Tubbo's face goes real gentle, one of his hands stretching out to land lightly on Ranboo's arm, "Well I'd *like* to do something for you, so let's go to Bosnoir. Probably a good idea to take a breather after that last one anyway."

*He maybe kinda has a point*, Ranboo relents, mouth pushing to the side as he nods his head back and forth, still gets chills thinking about how that imperial squadron dropped out of hyperspace right on top of them. It wasn't intentional, their captains likely hadn't noticed the Eshachi on their radars given its smaller size, but still, the experience rattled Tubbo hard, kept him awake for *days*, nervously checking over his shoulder the entire time.

"Alright, sure. Sounds good to me." Ranboo allows, because *now* he can lay it out in his head that they're doing this for *Tubbo, not him*, giving Tubbo a much needed break to relax and regain his confidence. The active warrants were only a problem in imperial sectors, which, *unfortunately*, was most of the known galaxy, but being part of the Syndicate helped cover some of his bases.

Technoblade's reputation precedes him like the howling winds of a sandstorm, is enough to hold off other bounty hunters after Tubbo or smaller sections of the fleet, but it's not airtight, room still for the empire to wiggle through if they really cared, could track Tubbo down if it was a priority.

But thankfully, Nirox doesn't give two shits right now about some shipyard fire that happened three years ago, nor the people responsible for it. New Dawn was summarily crushed out of existence barely freed from its infancy as a movement, and Ranboo's not in

the loop anymore, but he's sure there's some new insurgent group that's occupying all their attention.

*Like always*, he thinks, claws rapping quick against his bracelet. Anger simmers under his skin, disgusted with the whole system, *how he used to be a part of it*, and he's out now, but Ranboo doesn't know how anyone here can stand it, sitting back while Nirox continues bulldozing the universe. *Sticking their heads in the sand like dune striders want to be ignorant to what's going on*, part of his mind whispers cruel and heartless, and Ranboo slams a door in its face, claws sinking into the yellow cording because that's not true.

What are any of them supposed to do against *Nirox*? You can't fight something like that, and lots of people *think* they know how far the empire's reach goes but they *don't*, not really. Ranboo knows, spent innumerable sleepless nights combing through the archives in Voidfall and slinking into places he wasn't supposed to, looking for information he could use against other courtiers, came across everything else as a byproduct, and it's disheartening, knowing his father only goes by *king* as a formality, when in actuality he's something closer to *emperor*.

Annwyl and Nirox have been allies for centuries, have shared power and military strength and wealth to the point that they're crippling wound up with one another. The sway his father has alone is enough to rival the current emperor, but between the two of them, their combined resources and unwavering spines keep it so that their chokehold on the universe will never be shaken, and it's a sobering realization.

As long as they're working together, Ranboo doesn't think *any* planet has the strength to take them down, so he *can't* fault the Syndicate members for not acting, because what are they supposed to do, *what are they supposed to do*, against the deadliest powerhouse in the entire universe.

Everyone's just coping best they can given the situation, and that's all they really *can* do, move on with their lives and try not to focus on the glowing blaster barrel pointed in their faces. *How much longer though*, Ranboo thinks, staring despondently out at the bustling hub, all these people existing outside the empire's control, a lot of them with warrants of their own and problems they're trying to flee, all protected by the reputation of *one* man, *how much longer until that's not enough anymore*.

Ranboo's drawn out of his thoughts hearing an annoyed grumble and sees Tubbo glaring as he taps aggressively at his handheld, and such a violent streak of protectiveness runs through him that it makes him lightheaded, but Ranboo knows without *a shadow of a doubt* he's never letting *anyone* hurt Tubbo.

*They'll never get you cariad not while I'm here*, Ranboo sways forwards a little bit, like he's a planet caught up in the gravitation field of a star, *kill anyone that tries promise you that never let them touch you*, smiles at the way Tubbo pouts, shouldn't find it as endearing as he does when his antenna flick out to the sides, "Man. Fucker died *right* as I was 'boutta sign up. Is yours charged, Boo?"

"I got it." Ranboo says, already slipping his handheld out of his pocket, flicks it on and freezes immediately, seeing the beginning lines of a message on the lock screen from an



unlisted number.

## UNKNOWN

11:21

>> Prince Ranboo, your extended absence has greatly concerned many and it is requested that-

He flings the handheld out of his grip like it's burned him, doesn't hear as it clatters to the floor, doesn't hear much of anything as he backs up one shaky step after another, high pitched wailing in his ears that cuts out everything else.

*How how how how new handheld new number no one has it but Tubbo Dream Techno one of them's a traitor liar gave you up no NO none of them would ever went behind your back can't trust them can't trust anyone you only have yourself did you forget everything I taught you?* She asks in a sour tone and Ranboo won't look up, won't meet her eyes, but he can see her boots, the ends of her dress, *not surprised were always the slowest the most ignorant it's a mystery why they want you back anyway who would ever want you-*

*SHUT UP!* He claps his hands over his ears, so *tired* of being forced to listen to her, *to any of them why won't they leave him alone-* jerks violently as something touches his arms, *which one is it Meleeri father Reshaa won't miss this time*, hands falling away from his head and come back balled up into fists, *fuck you fuck you leAVE ME ALONE*, lashes out without thinking just *wants to hit something-*

Fingers wrap tight around his fist as it slams into a palm, blunted nails digging in sharp and fighting him back, but they're not tipped in claws and it makes Ranboo falter, blinking the haze out of his eyes long enough to register *panicked dark eyes staring at him wounded expression on his face brows drawn down in concern flash of a bead in the light*, and Ranboo jerks away fast.

*No no no no no what have you done what have yoU DONE-* and it's telling, when Tubbo doesn't stop him as Ranboo rips his loosened fist out of his hold, lets him go, just stares at him like ~~*fear and panic and you were going to hit me you were going to hurt me*~~

And Ranboo's heart lurches, taste of bile filling his mouth as he frantically takes this memory and shoves it behind the chain locked door, *no no no why what have you done what's wrong with you fuck you hate you fix it idiot can't do this to him why would you ever he's your cariad and you almost stru ck him.*

"T-Tu- Tu-bbo I-I'm- I- I'm so *s-sorry*." Ranboo stammers frantically, snarling his hands up together so they can't *do that again*, claws digging in sharp around his knuckles, threatening like a reprimand, *do not do that again don't you dare don't you daRE YOU MISERABLE THING-* "I-I-I I don't -k-kn-know what *h-happened-*"

*Liar yes you do finally slipping over the side brief reprieve and now there you go plummeting off the edge, Reshaa needles from behind him, cloud of her flowery perfume enveloping him like a miasma to the point that Ranboo thinks he's going to choke on it, breathe can't breathe do you even want to, focuses on it desperately as Tubbo finally croaks, "H-Hey, i-it's okay, it's okay, Boo. Sorry for um- f-for startling you, that's on me."*

*It's not okay it's not you almost hit him what's wrong with you broken wrong terrible thing horrible person corrupted fruit turned out just like them, and Ancients, it feels like he's dying, like there's a hole opening up under him that's going to send him tumbling through the air like books off the parapets and Ranboo doesn't care thinks he'd welcome it-*

*"Ranboo listen to me, you didn't do anything wrong okay?" Tubbo insists firmly, but he's wrong he's so wrong nothing good in you nothing worthwhile can't let him know he'll leave you, and it feels like a ton of bricks slams into him, falling on his shoulders and almost taking Ranboo to the floor, maybe you should let him see finally the push he needs to get away to realize his mistake undo that braid in his hair never should've put it there in the first place.*

That one hurts the most, digs in sharp under his ribs like a thermal knife dragging down his neck, across his shoulders, burning skin and cauterizing the wounds as it goes, a kind of aching pain that's never going to leave. *Because you know it's true know your mother lied to you from the start*, Ranboo sways a little where he stands, nose and throat stinging with the threat of crying, and he just *can't* anymore, doesn't know why he keeps doing this, getting up trying staying here he's just- *so tired all of a sudden.*

*"Boo? Are you ok- w-whoa-!"* Tubbo yelps from what sounds like a million miles away, lurches forward and manages to catch him as Ranboo's knees finally buckle, "Whoa, whoa, w-whoa, hey, it's okay, i-it's okay, Boo, I got'cha, it's okay."

His limbs refuse to cooperate and Ranboo just sinks further, doesn't have the energy to care when Tubbo grunts, struggling into a better position to basically support all his bodyweight, stammering the entire time, "Okay, y-you're okay, let's get you back, okay? How's that sound? D-Don't worry, Boo, i-it's okay, I got'cha, I-I'm here."

It doesn't feel like Ranboo's feet touch the floor the entire way back to their dorm, swears he can feel vertigo spinning through his veins as they walk, his hair floating past weightless, a great, sinking pit in his stomach that only comes when falling great lengths, keeps waiting a bit desperately to hit the ground.

*Just wait just wait little longer then it's all over just wait little more*, but the only thing he ends up crashing into is his bunk, Tubbo trying to let him down gently but Ranboo's complete deadweight at this point, slumps over with nothing in his head but a spinning black void that's swallowed him whole, mind turning end over end rapid fire.

There's thoughts but there's not, every single door open and letting out a stream of screaming chatter that bleeds into an incoherent wailing of static, like a thousand voices of the damned have risen up to shout their grievances at him. It hurts, *fuck everything hurts and it doesn't*, there's nothing and there's everything, endless darkness whipping past him like angry winds, like angry words, like thermal knives and needle claws and crushing loneliness, void like he's never known, sucking him in harsher than gravity than a black hole, *like a grave.*

*Told you you wanted it to be over just give in already don't you want that to not be here anymore,* a wicked curved smile asks in the dark, sharp like daggers like glass like a hand guiding him over the side, *it could be yours just let go no more aches no more pains just blissful quiet finally'd get rid of us isn't that what you've always wanted?*

Yes, no, maybe, he doesn't know, everything's too hard to try and piece together can't tell which end is up which is down, but he's tired, tired of falling of feeling out of control of not knowing where to go, lost in an endless dark waste with no moon overhead and no stars to guide him, alone and very small against the terrors that rear up in the eternal shadows.

He sinks down to his knees in the black sand, falls forward and watches his hands slip in next, freezing granules covering his knuckles his veins, wiping him out of existence, and how hard would it be really, to stick his head under, to let it take him whole, never come back up for air again? And he leans closer, feels the kiss of ice against his face, the barest whispers urging him to do it, *to give in what would ever stop you nothing would ever care who would even miss you?*

Heat blooms across his back, races across his skin and worms in deep like sunrays striking out through space, and he didn't realize how *cold he was* until then, hisses through his teeth as it *burns*, sears the nothingness out of him and floods in a whole host of new things. It's not sand under his hands anymore but soft grasses, yellow green and silky to the touch, firm earth under his fingers where they dig in, and his arms wobble, finally give out.

Instead of sinking and slipping down through layers of loose, tumbling particles, he lands heavy and stable on the ground, sun baking in hot to his back and bleeding *sensation* through his numb body, inhales tinged with clean earth and lavender, and the wind tangles through his hair as his eyes shutter closed, caresses across his scalp like adoring fingers.

*Promised me promised you'd stay,* the wind whispers the grasses sigh, and he exhales sadly, feeling weighed down with everything, doesn't know if he can keep that promise, and the sun leans closer begging, *I love you stay with me can't do this without you love you don't leave please don't leave me.*

*I'll try,* he hushes through numb lips, all that he can give right now, the incessant tug of unconsciousness pulling at his fingers and toes like quicksand out in the wastes, calling him into the only oblivion he's allowed, and he's already halfway there, loses whatever the sun whispers at his retreating back.

Ranboo must fall asleep, because the next thing he knows, he's blinking scratchy grit out of his eyes and staring blearily at the grey wall beside his bunk. His head is really woozy, struggling to pull itself together and make sense, keeps telling him this isn't right, he's not at HQ, but back on Apidae, and the memory of grass under his hands and sunlight on his back is so vivid, Ranboo almost believes it.

Propping himself up on a shaking arm, Ranboo clutches at his pounding head, wincing because it feels like he's hungover again and maybe he really *is* back on Apidae, but no, these are his sheets, that's his wall, blank save for where Tubbo hung up a poster of the Rioshan nebula, but just- *what's going on what happened why's everything so-*

“Oh neato bonito, you’re up.” And Ranboo whips around so fast, amazed that he’s finally dreamed something because that’s the only explanation he has for why thrice cursed *Ozzisosteon* of *Osseus* is sitting cross legged in the middle of the room, wooden tiles spread around them in a semicircle.

*No...no this is a nightmare*, Ranboo’s brain supplies unhelpfully and slightly hysterical, staring at where Ozzi’s head is rotated almost completely upside down, skeletal fingers drumming a quick little tune against their boney snout as they select a tile from a stack beside them and delicately clack it into place on a row to their left.

It’s surreal enough to line up with what Ranboo knows dreams are supposed to be, but he also knows himself and he *doesn’t* dream, shuffles around in bed and tries to figure out how he got here. *Pull up last coherent thought*, and it’s looking at Tubbo in the hub, knowing down in his bones he’d give his life for him, but then after that- *it splinters off gets weird gets hazy what’s wrong with you*, and Ranboo hangs his head, hand messaging at his temples.

“Wha- h-how’d you get in here?” Ranboo rasps, has to clear his throat a few times to get it back to something normal, and Ozzi shrugs, skull bouncing around with the movement and back into a proper position, “Tubbo let me in, hey, you any good at soludum?”

“I don’t even know what that *is*.” Ranboo groans, twisting around so he’s not forced to keep talking to Ozzi over his shoulder, sets his bare feet on the floor and blinks at his toes, can’t remember taking his shoes off. *That’s bad right that’s a problem right maybe your mind is slipping away out through all those cracks you’ve caused-* another tile clacks into place, draws his attention back to what has to be some sort of game spread out around Ozzi, and Ranboo slouches off the bunk, stumbles over on shaking legs.

He’s careful sitting down across from Ozzi, minds his trembling feet and doesn’t kick anything they’ve carefully arranged, props his head up on a fist and watches a bit dazed as Ozzi shuffles things around. Their glowing eyes flick up to his once, but Ozzi doesn’t say anything, a rare feat for them, just goes back to moving tiles in a sort of pattern that Ranboo starts to pick up on.

“Where’s Tubbo?” Ranboo asks in the quiet, obvious he’s not here anymore, boots absent from the side of his bunk, no jacket in sight, and Ozzi hums, moving a black tile with three dots to a red one with four triangles, clearly missing the better spot for it further along their rows.

After they set it down, Ranboo reaches out hesitantly, and when there’s no objections, he moves the tile, fingers locking up around the smooth feel of it when Ozzi says, “He went to go fix your handheld problem, should be back...soooooon-ish?”

*Prince Ranboo your extended absence panic and fear and how did they find me again anger leave me the fuck alone go away go away GO AWAY and that look on his face in his eyes almost struck him almost hurt him your cariad what’s wrong with you what’s wrong with you WHAT’S-*

Ranboo shakes as he sets the tile down, moves his hand back into his lap once he does and grips his knees harsh because *all of that was real it happened they found him again he almost*

*hit Tubbo*, and it feels like he's standing on the parapets, toes angling out over the side, distracted when a weirdly cold touch raps the back of his hand.

"Hey, hey, kostka, where should I put this one?" A tile with six red squares dances over the backs of Ozzi's knuckles, held up for Ranboo to inspect with a grand flourish, and he latches onto the question, distracts his spiraling mind by forcing it to find the best spot. It takes a minute, and Ranboo has to rearrange a lot of what Ozzi's done, but he gets the tile placed, doesn't even have a second before another one's held up for him.

They sit in companionable silence as they play through the game, Ozzi either really bad at it or purposefully messing up to drag it out for longer, but Ranboo doesn't mind, enjoys the distraction for what it is, nervously eyes the rattling doors in his hallway and worries about being left alone with them later.

"You know, there's an application you can get on your handheld to play soludum." Ozzi comments offhandedly, making another stupid move that Ranboo fixes a second later, fingerbones rapping against each other in a quick staccato, "You should download it, we could play together sometimes."

Ranboo slowly looks up from the tiles, knows what they're doing and didn't think Ozzi *knew* how to play *this* kind of game, but it doesn't seem like they have malicious intent, glowing eyes refusing to meet his as they ramble uncharacteristically shy, "And if you have problems figuring out the application store, that's okay, there's a lot there, easy to get lost in, ya'know I lost my right hand once for six weeks, just fell off- *plop*, there it went, but anyway, not what we're talking- so I could help you figure it out, I could just give my number or-"

"Stop, Ozzi." Ranboo orders softly, feels guilty watching the way their shadows sputter for a second, seems like they shrink down, curl back into themselves a little, and *wonder if they're like you hate being cut off hate being told to shut up didn't mean it like that just- didn't want them to keep panicking*, and Ranboo's quick to add on, "I-I um- I'll think about it, o-okay? It's...it's not you, I- just, I-I'm..."

And Ranboo trails off with a heavy sigh, fingers rotating the little tile in his hands end over end, *just like you spiraling through the void can't get a hold of anything lost to the abyss*, wraps it up in a fist and admits hoarsely, "I-It's *me*, I- there's just something...*wrong* with me."

It's unnervingly silent after that, and Ranboo panics, tail curling up behind him and ears flattening, mind working fast trying to find some way to cover his ass, to redirect what he said *to lie convincing enough*, when Ozzi's too quiet voice breaks his train of thought, "On my planet...things are...very different, upside down, from- most other places. My people revere death more than life and its- you're expected to-"

Ozzi doesn't say it and they don't have to, Ranboo doesn't *want* them to, toes curling harshly at the thought, *at the memory the parapets and the wind and the encroaching ground*, and Ozzi continues in that somber, echoing voice, "A-And I didn't *want* that...I wanted to *live*, s- so that's why I left...why I'm here, but it's hard it...it goes against everything I was taught and I feel...*so wrong* for wanting this."

Their arms have come up to snake around their chest tight, fingers clenching in the material of their bomber, just like Ranboo does sometimes when he feels alone and scared and helpless, and it's a painful connection, has him pushing to his feet soundlessly. Ranboo steps over the tiles and drops to his knees next to Ozzi, has no idea what to do, but knows what *he'd want*, leans forward and wraps his arms around them gently.

"You're not wrong, Ozzi, not being like them doesn't make you *wrong*." Ranboo murmurs, not sure what would happen if he put his face in their curling shadows so he stays back, but the urge to knock their heads together is there. Chittering spastically, one of Ozzi's hands comes up to clutch at his arm, their skull shifting so Ranboo's looking into a pulsating, orange eye that seems a little more unsteady than earlier.

"Say that all you like, kostka, but it doesn't change what up here says." Ozzi tells him, finger rapping against the side of their temple, and Ancients, Ranboo *knows*, he knows that so well, "But I figure it's okay yeah? I-It's okay right, if you think you're wrong, a-and I know *I-I am*. Then it's okay if we're...to be wrong together?"

*It's okay to be a little less than normal here*, his own voice whispering to him out of a memory, and Ranboo shivers, arms tightening as he finally gives in and knocks his forehead into the side of Ozzi's skull. Static tingles through his face like it's fallen asleep and is waking back up, but nothing drastic happens and Ranboo finds himself whispering, "What's your number?"

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### **Lesson Eighty-Three: Friends are just ~~enemies~~ dressed up under polite smiles**

Ranboo rushes across the courtyard, Meleeri's voice loud and unhappy in his ears demanding he *slow down stop making a buffoon of yourself*, but he begs her to leave off, tries arguing that he's late for something really important.

*Late? No child of mine is ever late*, she huffs, sticking her nose up in the air indignantly, and Ranboo's ears don't twitch, but they do in his mind, flatten close to his skull as she berates, *you should have made enough allowances for yourself to get where you need to go on time, it's no one's fault but your own, prince*.

*I know I know I'm sorry I'll be better next time*, Ranboo offers, darting quick around a group of students meandering down the path, knows there's no point trying to make excuses, she won't listen to a single one so it's just easier to give in, admit he failed and promise not to the next time.

*And yet you always break that promise don't you*, Reshaa giggles, hovering right over his shoulder and Ranboo *does* shiver this time, tail twitching hearing Meleeri click her tongue in reprimand, but Reshaa has center stage right now, *can't ever be anything more than you are little brother, a failure a disappointment. You're letting us all down you know*.

*I-I'm not trying to! Look, I'm doing well in all my classes*, Ranboo boasts, imagines showing her his quarterly report, but Reshaa isn't interested, raps her nails against his shoulder *one*

*two three one two three, hums in a bored tone, and? Is this supposed to wow me? These are all just the first year classes, any simpleton can pass those.*

Ranboo deflates, fingers curling harshly around the strap to his school bag, darts his eyes to the bleached white stone under his feet and whispers morosely, *I'm trying I- I'm sorry but I really a-am-*

*Well it's still not good enough, you think father would be impressed? Don't make me laugh, why would he ever be interested in something like you when he has me, Reshaa coos, and Ranboo can see her so clearly, standing beside father with the Moontide circlet, her perfect posture and voice that flows like silken sands, eyes intelligent and sharp and the correct color, every inch the perfect heiress, the perfect child.*

*That's right, Reshaa whispers and her hands curl over his shoulders, I'm perfect and you're not no one will ever want something as wrong as you are, and it's getting drug in front of mirror after mirror, her freezing fingers forcefully combing his hair out of his eyes, pointing at their reflection and snickering, something not right with you and everyone can see it little brother.*

His feet stutter over the smooth pavement, and Ranboo doesn't even get a second to right himself before Reshaa is laughing, Meleeri barking loudly, *pick your feet up! A prince does not falter nor does he trip, by the Ancients, can't you get a single thing right?*

Ranboo stops trying to argue with them after that, keeps his head down and lets them carry on the rest of the way to the library, claws dragging in nervous lines up and down his arms, always threatening but never following through. They two of them are still going by the time Ranboo passes through the arched doorways, sunlight dancing beautifully over the gilded Academy symbol embossed in the floor, and something in him unwinds a little, getting hit with the soft, familiar smell of books and reams of paper.

*Can you two just go for a little bit? I-I have an important meeting,* he asks hesitantly, and Reshaa scoffs, has never nor will ever listen to him, but Meleeri is shrewd, latches onto the question with deep suspicions, *meeting? What in the world do you need to have meetings for?*

*It's for a um- f-for an assignment,* Ranboo says hesitantly, heading for the curved staircase that'll take him to the upper levels, passes a few cadets in their royal blue uniforms, imperial suns flashing brightly on the shoulders of their jackets.

*Group work? How detestable...* Meleeri hisses and Ranboo couldn't agree more, but this is a little different, recognizes it as a mistake as soon as he thinks it, Meleeri's head swiveling to him quickly, *are you hiding things from me, your highness never were a good liar you know I'll find out eventually might as well **GIVE IN-***

Ranboo's walking along the upper floor, not too close to the glass railing but close enough that when he turns his head away from Meleeri, all he sees is an empty drop, and Reshaa slams into him hard, hissing, *do it do it do it do it again do it right this time promised you'd be better well here's step one jump over again-*

*STOP!* Ranboo shrieks, rolling his shoulders hard to throw her off and she goes with a mad cackle, Meleeri's complaining just background noise while he visibly shakes, takes a few staggering steps away from the railing, *stop stop s-stOP not again mistake didn't mean I don't want to you can't-* claws scrabbling under his sleeve, digging in ferociously to his arm and it *hurts*, but it forces the world straight around him.

He's alone in his head now and it's suddenly too quiet, too barren, but it gives Ranboo space to calm down, take a breather in the relative stillness of his hallway before going to find a bathroom. Thankfully the one he ducks into is empty, and he flips the sign on the door to say it's being cleaned, can finally loosen his claws from his forearm, holds it out so blood won't drip on anything else while he digs around in his satchel.

Pulling out the roll of medical tape and some disinfectant packets, Ranboo lays them out on the counter and gingerly rolls his sleeve back, relieved to see the punctures aren't that deep. Blood wells up in slow pulses, trickles of it beading down his arm and falling in little drips to the bright white counters, looks like some reverse image of space, blinding light populated by sinking blackholes.

It doesn't take long to get them taped up, bleeding mostly stopped anyway, but he just likes to be careful, can't keep throwing out tunics with bloodstained sleeves. Ranboo makes sure to wipe all the counters down with the little disinfectant wipes once he's done, double checks that he didn't leave a mess, that his tunic sleeve is lying flat before slinking out of the bathroom, flipping the sign back to *open* as he goes.

Passing by an ornate clock that's harder to read than it really should be, Ranboo picks his pace up, taking the second flight of stairs two at a time, mind unhelpfully rubbing it in his face that he's *fifteen minutes* late now. *What if they left what if they got tired of you*, the skeletons chuckle from the gutters and cracks under doors, faces frozen in perpetual grins, *serves you right all alone again but don't worry have us come back to us come home*.

They're easier to ignore than the others, never creep out into the real world, scuttle away when Ranboo swings to glare at them, and he does now, telling them all harshly, *leave off, they're going to be there...t-they're my friends*.

The skeletons chitter at him, *oh no oh no don't let her hear know what she'd say foolish boy*, but he stomps past them, storming through the library like it's Voidfall, like he has a cape on and something more than the informal diadem he's supposed to wear at school, like he's *important*.

Ranboo remembers what room they said to meet in, *of course he knows he can't forget anything only thing he can be proud of*, but he pulls his handheld out anyway, likes to see the long list of messages enthusiastically agreeing with him on a study location, lets it settle some of his nerves as he rounds a corner.

*Meleeri doesn't know everything it's not like home here they're not after anything they just like me for me*, Ranboo reminds himself over and over again, clutching to his chest the memories of being invited over to dorms for study sessions or out to dinner, thinks about the shows he's taken them to, the fun restaurants, how excited everyone is to see him, all the conversations and laughs and inside jokes.



It was a strange concept at first, the idea that people could want to spend time with him without wanting anything in return, but it made Ranboo giddier than he can ever remember being, getting texts asking him if he wants to go get lunch or join in on a game night. Their group is small, and with him included, fluctuates between six and seven, but it's *his* and Ranboo does everything he can to let them know he appreciates it.

He's more than happy to help out with homework or chipping in if someone's forgotten their wallet, has stayed up late proofreading essays that were due the next day, remembers namedays or birthdays without fail, prides himself on picking out excellent gifts. Ranboo wants to be a good friend, wants to keep this little piece of a normal life he's found for himself, and maybe it's selfish of him to not think about his family for once, but he's not good enough to give this up.

*They just don't have to know this 'll stay here and none of them will know you can still be the good son at home*, Ranboo tells himself as he spies the study room door, closed because they've likely already started which he feels *terrible* about, races across the open section of this floor with guilt nipping at his heels. He can hear laughter eking out from under the door, the room not soundproofed, especially for his ears, and he grins, *good they waited just hanging out everything's fine*, about to go for the door handle when he hears, "Ugh, I'm going back it's been twenty minutes now."

Ranboo stutters to a stop, tail going limp as his shoulders droop, can *feel* the disappointment in Kamber's voice, knows he's held them all up, *let them down that's all you do isn't it failure disgrace disappointment*, perks back up as Tiro chides, "Just hang on a little longer, he'll be here."

There's a couple indistinct grumbled responses, and he should really go in, stop keeping them waiting don't waste their time *they're you're friends-* but there's a part of him Ranboo can't stop, insists he wait *listen a little longer find out what they really think*, and he's trying to fight it off as Kamber sighs, "I just don't understand why we hang out with him."

Reality strobes, black stone parapets in front of him and a blindingly brilliant city that winks out of existence as fast as it appeared, and Ranboo blinks hard, has to be imagining things, he literally just got lunch with Kamber the other day, they had a really nice conversation about the new microorganisms discovered on Tolunay, o-or *so he thought don't know anything shut up they're his friends they are-*

"Hey now, don't say that." Tiro scolds but there's...something wrong about how they say it, and Ranboo's pulse ratchets up, thinking about his sister *her eyes her words how her smiles never reach her eyes and no no no no no you're overthinking just calm down just stop just-* "Do you know who he is?"

*Your friend your friend your fr- p-please say it don't say what I think you're going to please please please-*

"A pain in the ass." Nefise chimes in with and the room explodes into laughter, library spinning around Ranboo and pulsating fast in between here and up *there because that's everyone all their laughs he knows them so well took pride in hearing them held them close but they-*

“*Creators-* look. I know he’s like, the *sixteenth* prince or something, but is it worth it? Like, that doesn’t really *do* anything for us-”

*Eighth prince EIGHTH third of his name now tenth in line since Reshaa’s sons were born never been first of anything what do they mean doesn’t do anything for them he’s their friend he’s-*

“Yeah I know, but it’s still *a* connection Ediz, and besides, the money’s an added benefit, you can’t say it’s not. Did you *see* what he got me for my nameday? Dude’s *loaded-*”

*N-No no NO he can’t be just a name and a string of credits run out by his father a black mark on the ledger of your family but it’s okay it’s okay cuts on his arm throbbing if that’s it he can be okay with that he can pretend-*

“I wonder if it’s worth it sometimes. He’s so *fucking* annoying-”

*Crackle of static wind screaming in his ears steep drop under his toes just take that step just push yourself over lying to you they’ve been using you what did I tell you foolish boy on your own always going to be on your own should have listened-*

“-can’t stand it. He *never* shuts up, acts like he’s so smart but he’s an *idiot-*”

*Made a fool out of you think you’re weak think you’re dumb incompetent can’t speak even lack witted slow disgrace disappointment but what do they know WHAT DO THEY KNOW YOU’LL SHOW THEM-*

“-wish he’d just-”

*Disappear go away kill himself doesn’t matter they want him gone there’s never been anyone there never will be anyone you’re alone you’re alone you’re alone you’RE ALONE FUCK THEM FUCK THEM FUCK THEM-*

His fingers grip the doorknob like they’re trying to tear straight through it, frozen tide of seething spitting terrible *anger* rising up in his mind, flooding his veins, doors crashing open and letting everything scuttle free, skeletal hands hanging off him and screaming in delight as he storms in there, Reshaa’s cutting smile on his face and father’s hard eyes taking them out at the knees, Meleeri’s lessons fueling the words flowing steady and even and *devastating* from his mouth.

None of them speak to him again, some of them drop out, and Ranboo starts eating lunch alone.

--

Bosnoir is about a sixteen hour flight from HQ, during which, Ranboo and Tubbo do not talk about The Incident. Instead, Tubbo sings softly to the music pouring out of the speakers overhead, and Ranboo sits huddled in his chair, playing game after game of soludum on his new- *totally legally acquired stop asking questions Ranboo just take it* -untraceable handheld with Ozzi.

Ozzi

24:09

>> kekeke another loss 4 u boober

<< Ancients of the Deep, will you stop calling me that?

<< And it was a lucky win.

>> mleh mleh mleh

>> magine me waggin my jaw at u cuas that's what im doin

24:15

<< Isn't it close to midnight local time? Shouldn't you be getting some rest.

>> n4h monto has sum ppl over m just chillin

>> ur not keepin me up Rannoozle (づ。●—●。)づ

<< How in the world did you do that?

>> KEKEKEKEKEKEKEKE

>> ㄟ(´▽`)ㄟ

>> (´•ω•`)

>> (✿◡—◡)

>> ㄟ••?

<< OZZI TELL ME

>> ୪\_୪

<< UGH

“Hey.” Ranboo asks, breaking the silence, leans across the gaps in their chairs and holds his handheld out to Tubbo, points vehemently at the screen, “What is that? How are they doing it?”

Tubbo squints at the text thread in confusion before his entire face lights up like the sun and he starts cackling with laughter, one arm braced on his chair to keep him upright, and Ranboo knows he’s getting made fun of, but he can’t be upset by it, not with how Tubbo’s smiling.

“*Queens, Boo*, Boo that’s just an emoji, you have’em too look- c’mere.” Tubbo gently takes his handheld and Ranboo scrambles out of his chair, curls up beside Tubbo’s with his chin propped on the armrest, watches as he hits some little icons that he’d never paid attention to before.

A whole new menu pops up, now populated with small images, and Ranboo takes his handheld back with wide eyes, tailing curling behind him excitedly while he scrolls through it.

**Ozzi**

24:36

<< Hey

<< Hey

>> ya

<< (୩ • \_ )୩

>> KEKEKEKKKEKE U FIGURED IT OUT GOOBJOD

<< (ò\_ó)

<< (п ` -')ㄣ— .\*.°

>> (ノ° 0°)ノ~

<< Ⅲ(° Ⅲ° Ⅲ)

>> (´•ω•`)

>> w4it this 1s u

>> 

Ranboo busts out laughing at the stupid little image, has no idea *how* it's supposed to look like him but the absurdity of it makes warmth bloom in his chest, wicked grin on his face as he scrolls through the whole library of emojis, trying to find one in particular.

**Ozzi**

24:42

<< This one looks like you.

<< (\* ◉౪ ◉。)ノ

For a second, he worries he's gone too far, grin melting off his face as his fingers still on the screen, regret lighting up under his skin, but before Ranboo can start back tracking, *apologize went too far upset them what's wrong with you always hurt your friends*, a series of messages come in.

**Ozzi**

24:48

>> ROFL

>> YEA

>> U RITE

<< Who in the world is Rofl?

>> KEK

>> never canhe boober man, never change

<< ღ(ಠ\_ಠ)ღ

>> (づ。●—●。)づ

“What’re you laughing at, smiley pants?” Tubbo asks in a lilting voice, and it’s too complicated to explain, so Ranboo tips his handheld up for him, lets him scroll through and read their messages, loves watching his eyes crinkle, “Yeah, Ozzi’s right, it does look like you.”

“Fuck you, no it doesn’t.” Ranboo huffs good naturedly, propping his chin back up on the armrest, grinning because Tubbo makes a big show of looking in between his handheld and him, one hand cupping his chin in thought, eventually hums, “Mmm, no. Sorry Boo, but we gotta agree to disagree.”

Ranboo clicks his teeth playfully at him, gets his handheld back and scrolls up to the first emoji he sent, the little angry one, holds the screen out towards Tubbo and says, “Well this one’s you, *eshachi*.”

He meant it to be a joke, something to make Tubbo laugh, is completely unprepared for the complicated way his face twists, eyes going glassy like he’s on the verge of tears, and Ranboo panics, drops his handheld and rushes to apologize, “I-I’m so sorry, Bo- I-I-I shouldn’t have- n-not my place I *get it* I-”

“Boo, hey, *Ranboo*, it’s okay, promise.” Tubbo sniffs wetly, dragging the sleeve of one of his upper arms across his eyes, pulls it away and is thankfully smiling, dimples in both cheeks as he says shyly, “I um...I just- I-I didn’t think I’d uh, e-ever hear you speak Apian, and I-I dunno...it’s nice. And that nickname um, it means *a lot*.”

*Oh...oh good tears then happy overwhelmed it's okay you did okay it's fine you're okay,* Ranboo relaxes incrementally, didn't know him speaking Tubbo's native language was that special to him, wracks his brain trying to remember what order the words are supposed to go in, picks out hesitantly, "Ciao, Bo, comi agis?"

The laugh that slips out of Tubbo is startled but overjoyed, and he leans over, a hand dropping to scratch through Ranboo's hair, another one propping his head up as he says smoothly, "Mirabile, e tu, stelledore?"

Ranboo doesn't recognize the words at the beginning or end of what he says, leans harder into his touch and tries to rifle around in his compendium, but it's all jumbled up, only thing he has room for in his head the feeling of fire bright fingers dragging along his skin, "Mmm...sorry, I don't know. What's that mean?"

"Amazing, and you?" Tubbo translates dutifully, and Ranboo matches the words together, makes sure he remembers them for next time, but it doesn't add up perfectly, last word still left hanging, and he tilts his head under Tubbo's questing fingers, asks sleepily, "An' the last one? Wha's that mean?"

*"Tu? Uh, 'you', I already told you that, sleepyhead."* Tubbo chides playfully, fingers raking back whole sections of his hair, pull gently at the weight of his braid, such a wonderful feeling that Ranboo trills in the back of his throat. He almost lets the question go, content to drift off into sunny static as Tubbo plays with his hair, but his brain is obsessed with knowing things, and it keeps pricking at him, shaking the half-filled paper at Ranboo demandingly.

*Fix it fix it ask again blank spot can't leave it hey ask have to know fix it fix it fix it fix it fix- Ancients fine hold on-*

"No no, m'got that. The one at the end..." Ranboo sighs muzzily through the noises he keeps making involuntarily, ears twitching happily as Tubbo's fingers scratch at the base of his horns, forces his mind to focus on drawing the word up instead of the hands in his hair, hopes he pronounces it correctly when he asks, "I think it's...*stelledore*? Wha's that one mean?"

Tubbo freezes so fast, Ranboo worries something horrible has happened, tips his head up quick expecting bad news and blinks his eyes wide at how red Tubbo's face is. It bleeds up the sides of his neck, stains his cheeks and the tip of his nose, and when their eyes meet, Tubbo jerks his head to the side, anxious laughter tripping from his mouth.

"U-Um, well uh, yeah so i-it's like- *ha*, uuuhh, like just-" He stammers, whistling air out between his teeth, and Ranboo's only ever seen him get like this once before, mind pulling for him the memory of dancing on Tjhia-Yuet, Tubbo dragging his antenna along Ranboo's horns, how red he went after Ranboo asked him what he was doing.

*Gesture he only does with family with someone important so stelledore's like that then something personal something intimate,* and Ranboo's heart melts a little, adoringly fond sappiness dripping out through his ribs, settling warm and heady in his gut, and he angles his head to the side, grinning slow and sweet as he drawls, "Yes?"

That only makes Tubbo fluster further, blush having faded out a little but now returning full force, and he groans, tipping his head back, upper set of hands waving around erratically while he talks fast, “O-Okay, *look*, I’m not like- I-I’m not like a sappy uh, kinda person? S-So I don’t know *why*- but like- ugh, j-just...you’re *not* allowed to laugh, okay?”

“I won’t.” Ranboo promises earnestly, now more curious than anything to know what the word means, why it invokes such a reaction, and with a great heaving sigh, Tubbo tips his head back down, looks like it pains him greatly to admit, “It means *starlight*, it’s like...an e-endearment or whatever...”

*Endearment phrase to express love and affection pet name something partners do something spouses do something you could do*, his brain spits out and Ranboo nods in thanks, pats it on the head for a job well done, but otherwise, isn’t sure how he’s supposed to respond. Endearments aren’t common in Enderian, most he ever got was mother calling him *darling* or *dear one*, can’t remember a single instance of his parents using them between one another.

But it apparently looks like they’re a big deal on Apidae, Tubbo wouldn’t be acting like this if they weren’t, shrinking down into the collar of his bomber as he steadfastly refuses to make eye contact, something he hardly ever does. *Oh fuck is he upset does he think you don’t like it shit shit shit be reassuring tell him you adore it say something anything*, but in his haste, Ranboo trips up on everything he’s trying to say, incomprehensible word vomit stuttering out of his mouth.

*Wow. Great. Thank you, brain.* Ranboo thinks, clapping his hands over his flushed face, embarrassment tinting his skin a dark off purple, doesn’t understand why he has to be like this in moments that really matter. Dragging his fingertips down over his cheekbones, Ranboo huffs raggedly and says *very* slowly, but with great enunciation, “I. Adore. It. Thank. You.”

“*Ha*, um- t-thanks? I guess. I um- i-it just kinda slipped out...” Tubbo says awkwardly, one hand ruffling the hair at the back of his head, still looks a little unsure, *uncomfortable*, but his eyes dart back to steal glances at Ranboo a few times, like he’s checking for something, like he’s *waiting for something*.

And it’s like a light comes on, sudden flash of understanding, *endearments usually go both ways he gave one to you expecting you to give one to him*, Ranboo realizes, eyebrows shooting up and then furrowing back down, not sure he knows how to do this.

He knows the standard ones, *babe honey sweetheart*, but they feel cheap for some reason, like there’s no effort behind them, and his guts’ telling him that’s a bad idea, that he needs to come up with his own. *It’s like a cariad bead*, he thinks, *should be something special*, just like Tubbo one in a million, *something that reminds you of him*, warmest smile he’s ever seen and heart shining with brilliant light, *a word that shows how much you love him*, and it’s out of his mouth before he can second guess himself.

“Heulwen.” Ranboo says quietly and it feels right, like it settles into existence as a tangible thing he can touch, something that’s always been there, and he looks up at Tubbo, the curious set to his face, antenna perked up in interest, *so bright so smart so caring and kind and*



*loving*, and it eases out warm and dear, “*Heulwen*. Sunshine. That’s your’s, your endearment.”

Tubbo doesn’t blush again, but his face goes through a whole range of emotions Ranboo struggles placing, and he turns away with a short huff, mumbling under his breath, “You are...such a *fucking* dork, I swear-”

“Yeah, but I’m *your* dork...” Ranboo stresses, rocking his head on the armrest until Tubbo has to meet his eyes, grins watching the way they crinkle, and can’t help taking on, “...*heulwen*.”

“*Dork*.” Tubbo enunciates, flipping his head up and shakes the hair out of his face, eyes only for the console as he busies himself with checking all the readouts. He hums at something on one of the screens, lower hand dropping back to swat at Ranboo gently, fingers poking around at his face as Ranboo tries to lightly bite them, “Hey, dorkus dorkman, move your ass, we’re going to be landing soon and I don’t want to like- launch your lame face through the viewp- *did you just bite me?*”

“No.” Ranboo says automatically even though he totally just did, and Tubbo groans but he’s trying to fight the smile off his face, and doing a crap job at it, Ranboo can see a dimple from here.

“You are a *child*.” Tubbo grouses as Ranboo gets up off the floor, joints cracking from sitting in one place for so long, and he swings his tail back, smacking it lightly against the side of Tubbo’s head, quips over his shoulder, “Uh, I’m pretty sure I’m older than you by like *half a year*.”

“No you are *not*. When’s your birthday?”

“Eighty fifth of Digwyddiad.” Ranboo answers, not thinking anything of it, but Tubbo rounds on him with two fingers pointed accusingly in his direction, righteous indignation on his face as he snaps, “No. *No*- that is not a real word, you’re making things up. *Ranboo*, tell me that’s not a *real word*-”

“Oh you think *that’s* bad, how about *chwyrlligwgan* or *coegfeddyginiaeth*?” Ranboo says with utter glee, bouncing in his seat watching slow death creep into Tubbo’s expression, “Or what about *Gosodiadlleuad*? *Mynydd*? *Pelfasged*?”

“*Queens- stoop!*” Tubbo whines but he’s smiling while he does it, and Ranboo laughs loudly, the sound echoing a bit in the small space of the cockpit, grins so it bears his fangs and tsks, “I *told* you Enderian was a nightmare language. Why do you think literally *no one else* speaks it? It’s *horrible*.”

Ranboo’s only partially joking, has always disliked the echoing, warping cadence to his mother tongue, and he knows it’s not just personal bias, *a lot* of other species feel the same, but Tubbo seems to think it over for a long minute, eventually shakes his head, “I don’t think it’s *horrible*, I kinda like it actually, it reminds me of-”

He cuts himself off abruptly, snapping his mouth closed so quickly, Ranboo can hear his teeth clack together, and his ears perk up in interest, always fatalistically curious. “What? What does it remind you of?” He asks, combing through a list of other languages he’s heard and can’t find any that match the special kind of, *disturbingly otherworldly shrieking* Enderian has.

Shrugging his shoulders, Tubbo acts like he’s super busy with something, *he’s not*, lower set of hands anxiously picking at his jacket cuffs while he stares off into space, “I- y-you’re gonna think I’m *crazy*-”

“No-” Ranboo quickly breaks in with, *hates hates hates* speaking over people but this is an exception, *this will always been an exception*, “No, I’m not *ever* going to think that. I will *never* judge you for what you tell me, okay?”

*Never never never cariad you have me no matter what always believe you always trust you*, but Tubbo doesn’t look totally reassured, and Ranboo stretches across the gaps in their chairs, holds a pinky finger out like he’s seen Tubbo do sometimes with other Syndicate members.

Tubbo snorts, but he reaches back, linking one of his pinkies around Ranboo’s, and Ranboo takes the opportunity to shift their hands a little, fingers slotting together easily, like pieces to a puzzle, looks him directly in the eyes and says, “No judgement, *promise* heulwen.”

“We’re really doing this then? We’re really-” Tubbo sighs, shakes his head and looks off to the side, up at the ceiling, and finally back at Ranboo, cheeks slightly pink when he says, “Alright fine. I’ll tell you...stelledore.”

Hearing it now, spoken at him with the understanding of what it means, Ranboo can’t stop the way his tail poofs out a little, curling behind him pleasantly because that’s just for him, *for Ranboo*, and no one else, *he’s* Tubbo’s stelledore, *starlight*, something special and precious and worthy of love and wow okay, maybe this endearment thing meant more to him than he originally thought.

Tubbo worries his lip with his teeth, fingers drumming a quick staccato against the back of Ranboo’s hand where they’re still tangled together, and after he lets out a huge, gusting exhale, he starts talking, “Okay...so I think I’ve like- *told you* before, but, um, s-sometimes when I’m like, out in deep space? I can hear music er- a song? I guess? I don’t know just... something.”

“I remember.” Ranboo encourages quietly, *sand and heat and fire in the sky first time he looked at you like you mattered*, lightly flexes his claws around Tubbo’s knuckles, stroking adoringly over tensed ligaments until they relax back out, and Tubbo says shakily, “*R-Right*, well um, I know it’s probably just a trick of the ears, hearing things where there isn’t, but I... don’t...mind it? I-I’ve always liked it, and um, a-and Enderian it uh...it kinda reminds me. Of that.”

*I hear it echoing out of the dark beyond like it’s the stars themselves singing to me welcoming me home he says like he’s not really thinking like he forgot you’re there and that’s fine you don’t care think you might die here anyway wouldn’t be so bad if this is the last thing you heard*, comes winding out of Ranboo’s memories like heatwaves wiggling in the distance and

then in rapid fire succession it's, *the reverential way Tubbo looks at the stars and think it's where I've always belonged and thought I'd meet you there* and Ranboo understands.

*Starlight starlight starlight loves the stars more than anything call of deep space in his bones something so central so personal and he calls you that he loves you he loves you so much you're his starlight*, and Ranboo's head swims, completely overwhelmed in a tidal wave of silvery, shimmering light that swamps through his hallways, feels like it scours every surface clean and he stammers in Enderian, *in the language he loves*, "I-I'm yours for the rest of eternity, sunshine, nothing will e-ever make me stop loving you."

"W-What did you say?" Tubbo whispers, eyes wide and unblinking like *somehow someway he knows too*, and Ranboo laughs tremulous and shaky, clicks catching on his exhales as he shakes his head, can't find the words to even *begin*, sums it up with a hoarse, "I l-love you."

Their hands stay linked the entire time they're descending through Bosnoir's atmosphere, Tubbo doesn't pull away, actually wiggles their fingers closer and bats his thumb back and forth with Ranboo's, something that's too sweet to really be called thumb wrestling, but a little too aggressive for affectionate touches.

Off white clouds drift past the viewport, eventually breaking to reveal miles and miles of slick red leaves and blinding white tree trunks, large section of forested earth breaking into stretches of farmland, huge pieces of industrial machinery combing through the rows as they zoom past overhead.

"What're they growing?" Tubbo asks, craning his neck to get one last look at the fields as he nudges the yoke to the left, sends the Eshachi swinging towards a range of jutting mountains, their sides terraced into more cropland.

"Tea mostly, Bosnoir's periods of extreme rain and drought help it produce some of the widest range of consumable tea leaves in the empire." Ranboo recites automatically, imagines thumbing through a large book, fingers darting past boring information like political structures and how the water cycle here actually runs counterclockwise, "Did you know the people here never evolved to communicate verbally? They're all touch telepaths."

"Really?" Tubbo says in surprise, actually interested unlike most everyone else Ranboo's ever spoken with, and he hums in affirmation, eyes excitedly tracking over long, spindly mountains, "Yeah, I think their species started off using a form of echolocation, but it evolved into a type of sensory communication transmittable by touch."

"Yo that's so cool! How does something like that even happen?" Tubbo asks and Ranboo deflates a little, ears lowering because this is what he always dreads, someone always going past his limited range of knowledge, knows he's going to disappoint when he says, "Sorry, I um, I don't really know *that* much about it..."

"Know more than me." Tubbo says gently, taking his eyes off the viewport for a split second so he can glance at Ranboo, quick flash of the night sky and sunlight in his smile and twin dimples, thumb dragging warm and loving over Ranboo's skin as he turns back around. *Thank you for being you*, Ranboo thinks, staring at their joined hands, so different and yet

nothing has ever made more sense, looks up at Tubbo's profile and smiles softly, *thank you for letting me be me and loving it.*

The town they're going to is cut into the beginnings of a massive section of forest, and it's so small, it doesn't even really have a proper port, just a section of dusty white earth that has sloppy lines painted on the ground. A huge cloud of sandy soil kicks up as the Eshachi touches down, billowing clouds of it that get sent flying by the turbines as they slow to a stop.

*Must be in the dry season then*, Ranboo hums with a flick of his tail, sliding down into the cargo hold after Tubbo, *good for me then hate that stupid water repellent makes my skin so waxy*, stands shoulder to shoulder with him as they grab their gear, blasters slipping neatly into holsters, thermal knife that Ranboo tucks into the sheath at the back of his pants, end of his bomber concealing it nicely.

They leave their bags for now, decide to wait until they get some more information from their client, one Miss Lezviye Topora, a local researcher struggling to make any headway in a clustering of pre-imperial native ruins. Ranboo did some reading on the Bossack before they got here, but didn't end up making much progress with his mind as distracted as it was, had trouble getting it to pay attention under the heavy fog it'd fallen into.

Thankfully, it seems to have gone for now, cleared out by some combination of screwing around with Ozzi and talking with Tubbo, and Ranboo can enjoy himself as they make their way through the small village, intrigued by the intricately carved houses and horrified over the locals. Neither him nor Tubbo are subtle about it the first time they pass someone, craning their heads around to gawk after the lanky bone white figure that *towers over Ranboo*.

Tubbo slaps at him none too discreetly, wide, shit eating grin on his face, laughing light in his eyes that seems to tease *how does it feel how does it feel how does it feel*, and the answer is *weird*, Ranboo having to tilt his head up to make eye contact with the razor thin, slitted eyes of the Bossack. Despite not having ears on their oblong, mask-like heads, the Bossack they stop seems to understand them just fine when they ask for directions, holds out a three fingered hand in response that Tubbo hesitantly touches, antenna standing bolt upright as soon as he does.

"You okay?" Ranboo murmurs as soon as they've moved on, Tubbo shaking himself out of his stupor, and he nods shakily, one hand rubbing at an antenna like it's bothering him, "Y-Yeah...yeah, that was just um- that w-was a little strange."

*Whatever frequency they communicate at must be hard on his senses*, Ranboo's mouth twitches to the side and he drifts a little closer, tail darting out to caress against Tubbo's wings, dips his head down and says, "Hey, let me handle it next time, okay?"

"I can do it." Tubbo snaps, defensiveness rising quick and sharp, spurred on from years of people looking down on him, telling him he wasn't good enough, and Ranboo reaches out slowly, places a hand on his shoulder, slides it up to linger on the back of his neck, murmurs, "I know, but you don't have to be uncomfortable. I'm here, let me do this for you."

Gravely dirt crunches under their boots, Bosnoir *very* quiet around them while Tubbo mulls it over, and he eventually relents with a sigh, complicated set to his face when he looks up at Ranboo, “Fine, but I *can* do it. I’m not like- *incapable* of stuff.”

“I know.” Ranboo says again, slipping his hand off because it looks like they’re here, a tall, willowy cottage with tiny lacelike designs painted on the doorframes in a bright red, trails his fingers up through Tubbo’s hair and tells him as earnestly as he can, “You’re the most capable person I know, Bo. Seriously, I don’t know where I’d be without you, you’re incredible.”

Tubbo doesn’t say anything, just watches him step up to the door with wide eyes, and after knocking, Ranboo goes to fold his hands behind his back before remembering *touch telepaths*, drops them to his sides as the door opens. “Good afternoon, Miss Topora I presume?” He asks, holding a hand out towards the towering woman, feathered spines on her head ruffling in seeming greeting as she does the same, and when their skin brushes, it feels like he’s been electrocuted.

*Hello, thank you for coming all this way. You can call me Lez if you like*, her voice whispers in his mind and yeah, that’d be strange if you weren’t used to it, but unfortunately Ranboo is *very familiar* with the feeling, automatically answers her nonverbally, *of course, I’m Ranboo by the way and that’s my partner, Tubbo*.

*Pleasure*, Lez says, her voice sonorous and airy, carrying in odd ways, like an echo he can’t quite pin down, and she shifts back a step, still maintaining contact effortlessly, *please, won’t you come in?*

She’s recently made a pot of tea and offers them some, and after a quick test, Ranboo figures out he *cannot* drink the water here, stares mournfully at Tubbo sipping at what smells like a truly amazing brew while Lez relays her struggles with the ruins.

They were built pre-conquest, and as such, a lot of information about how to access areas of the temple and even what it’s for have been lost. Since the Bossak are nonverbal, most of their history was preserved on something called probuzhdenyia, or *wake stones*, which, Ranboo’s still a little fuzzy on the details even after Lez walks him through it twice, but it sounds like the Bossak are able to impress their memories into the stones for later generations.

*I’m hoping to find the principal stone in the temple center, it would have the most information regarding pre-imperial culture of local native groups*, she says, fingers splayed out gently on the back of Ranboo’s hand while a section of her face unhinges so she can drink her tea, *hopefully it’ll provide some more insights, all I’ve been able to glean so far is that the structure is meant to be symbolic of a journey*.

Lez is a national historiographer for her planet, has a special grant from the high council on Nirox to ‘*make inquests into local culture for preservation purposes*’ which Ranboo knows actually means, ‘*hey we kinda realized we almost wiped your civilization out but can we have some cool shit for our museums*’ and the hair on his tail bristles.

*Do you know what they're going to do with the stones if you find them,* he asks, staring up at her hard, the gentle sloping lines of her face and bright red curl of facial markings, hopes the anger isn't super prevalent in his thoughts, *you have to know Nirox isn't going to let you keep them-*

*It's better to have access to them than none at all...even if it's not under our own jurisdiction,* Lez says with a tilt to her head, long, narrowed red eyes narrowing further as Ranboo seethes quietly, freezing fire licking at his thoughts that he's desperately trying to rein in, but she must feel some of it, whispers, *interesting. You're Ender...why do you hate the empire so?*

Ranboo's used to guarding his thoughts, but not like this, not with someone who has a front row seat as it all goes spilling past in the background, is used to keeping a tight leash on everything outside but *never inside*, and it hurtles past out of control and wild.

*Towering walls and inky floors standing in line with everyone else no one cares nasty smiles and cruel eyes pretending to be kind they never cared hate them a universe you've yearned for but have never seen smile that can rival any star and outstretched hands come with me he cares people you care for like your own with steel spines and upturned chins forced to bend made to think this is it this is all they deserve useful set of hands greatest manufacturing plant care so much and aren't cared about in return how dare they how DARE ANYONE YOU HATE THEM YOU HATE THEM YOU HATE-*

Lez jerks her hand back like she's been burned, eyes wide and unblinking in her face, staring at Ranboo like she *saw, saw the doors and the winding poorly lit hallways the stairs the skeletons this maze he's built to keep everything in*, and he swallows hard, has to break eye contact, shivering hard because *no one* has ever been there but *him*.

Something touches him and Ranboo flinches, loud, demanding voice barking, *everything I taught you gone to waste look at what you've become can't keep yourself together let everything get to you you're weak you're no child of mine*, and Meleeri's there *right in front of him*, silver hair tied back in a harsh bun, *everything about her harsh her hair her eyes her words her spine*, and he drops his gaze fast.

*Go away go away go AWAY- just leave me alone!* He yells, hands fisting harsh in his lap, dangerous bite of claws at his palms, freezes watching a light colored hand cover his own, silvery nicks of past scars and red scrapes of new ones, blunted ragged nails, rough callouses he knows like he knows his own face dragging across his skin, fingers worming determinedly in between his.

*Cariad cariad cariad cariad*, his mind repeats on loop as Ranboo squeezes back like it's a lifeline, only thing keeping his head above the sucking black sand of the wastes, focuses on the feeling of Tubbo's thumb dragging across his knuckles and not on the woman yelling in front of him, *no no not real not a person specter ghost imaginary thing she's not real she's not here get a grip-*

He doesn't think he's spaced out for long, but the next thing Ranboo knows, Tubbo's tugging him up, softly murmuring that it's time to go, and Ranboo follows him in a daze, offers polite goodbyes to Lez and feels like he's being strangled when she doesn't reach for his hand, simply waves in farewell as she shuts the door.

*She knows she knows she knows*, howls in his mind like a sandstorm, dark, hollow faces staring back at him from the cracks in doors, *she knows how bad it is how deep the cracks run protect yourself kill her protect her kill yourself*, and Ranboo twitches like he's been struck, mind reeling to a background cacophony of a hundred echoing peals of deranged laughter.

*Leave me alone leave mE ALONE*, Ranboo shrieks but they don't listen they never listen, slam their skeletal bodies against chained up doors, desperate to be let out, and he stands there and feels like he's losing it, doesn't know why he keeps ending up back here, was fine just a second ago was happy why is he like this constantly *backsliding into old habits and bad ways can never get out like quicksand in the wastes it's got him and it's not letting go never getting out just give in let it cover your head-*

A loud, grating rattle knocks him out of his mind and Ranboo blinks in confusion, has no recollection of getting back on the Eshachi, but he's obviously standing in the cargo hold, watches as the hatch seals shut, *what in the world-*

Boots tromp past behind him, and spinning around quickly, Ranboo tries to figure out *what* Tubbo's doing because it clearly looks like he's putting his weapons *away*, and that doesn't *make any sense*, *why would he-* asks bewildered, "W-What are you doing?"

"It's okay, Boo, don't worry about it." Tubbo says with a quick smile but it doesn't reach his eyes, *always has before smiles with his whole face just like mother never like that never like Res-* and a terrible shiver runs down Ranboo's spine, has him standing up straighter, feels like someone's standing behind him *watching waiting calculating*, starts in a warning tone, "Tubbo-"

"It's seriously okay, promise. Nothing's wrong, Boo." Tubbo stresses even though something *clearly is wrong*, he's dodging the question and fake smiling *is he lying on top of that*, and Ranboo's fingers spasm, claws flexing dangerously close to skin, can't stop looking away from Tubbo moving about the cargo hold, can't figure out what *he's doing almost like he's flight prepping but that doesn't make any sense unless it does-*

Ranboo lurches forwards, *he's planning on leaving he's planning on going back voiding the contract has to be because of you what happened your stupid broken mind and that stupid telepath thinks you can't handle it*, stops Tubbo with a quick jerk to one of his arms, demands past a suddenly bone dry throat, "We are *not* leaving."

He knows he's gotten it right with how Tubbo stills, wings shifting against one another like they only do when he's really nervous, deep, rattling sigh hushing out that ends in, "I'm just...there's supposed to be um, a-a lot of *mentally uh- demanding* things in the temple and I-I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to do this one..."

"Why would you think-?" Ranboo starts and then stops in choked off horror because *she must have told him spread her fingers out along his hand and said that one's broken that one's wrong something bad lurking down there shouldn't trust him not competent unfit for this unfit for anything*, and his grip goes crushing around Tubbo's wrist as he hisses, "*What did she tell you?*"

“N-Nothing! Lez just um, j-just expressed some *concerns...*” Tubbo stammers, eyes wide and staring at him like he’s trying *to see underneath see inside figure out what went wrong where*, and a voice cackles behind Ranboo, *went wrong at the very start should’ve never been born should’ve never lived-*

Ranboo grinds his teeth together, forces himself to stay still, to not drop Tubbo’s wrist and swing around like a madman punching at empty air, ground slipping out from under him slightly when Tubbo murmurs in a whisper quiet voice, “I-Is there something...*you*, need to tell me?”

*Yes yes yes yes* Reshaa sings in cruel glee, the skeletons parroting back dutifully, watching from dark gutters and the gaps in doors, spindly finger bones stretching out for him always *always always trying to pull him in back down just give up*, and Ranboo untenses his jaw long enough to get out, “No.”

*Liar*, intones on his left like the great, final booming slam of the throne room doors closing behind him, *demand he be honest with you and yet never offer him the same courtesies entitled think you’re better than him, your cariad, what a terrible thing you are what a monster I raised-*

*Leave me the fuck alone or I swear-* Ranboo howls, shivers racing over his skin as father drifts closer, quiet tinkling of his jewelry knocking together, searing light of his green eyes insistent and boring into him, *or what, what will you do? Empty threats empty everything shell of a person hollow inside nothing worthwhile in you never has been you’re nothing and he’s going to see it-*

“Ranboo!” Tubbo’s voice is strained, *panicked*, demands his attention immediately, and his eyes refocus on what’s in front of him, Tubbo staring at him *mouth pulled to the side in a grimace*, one hand locked around Ranboo’s wrist *hauling him back stopping his claws from sinking in more*, little pained smile he forces on his face when their eyes meet *what’s wrong with you*, “C-Could you, *ah*, could you l-let go?”

Ranboo rips his hand back and winds them around his upper arms, *told you told you told you to stop to not do that again why can you never listen* screaming in his head as he takes a few quick steps back, tongue thick and heavy and slow in his mouth as he stutters, “N-No n-no n-no, d-did I-I-I um, *d-did I h-hurt y-y-yo-?*”

“No, no not at all, Boo, and even if you did it’s okay.” Tubbo soothes, *and it’s not okay ITS NOT hurting him is never okay what do you do what do you do what do you-* and Tubbo follows him step for step, upper set of hands held out placatingly, but still reaching for him, somehow somehow *still wants to touch him be near him*, “Hey it’s okay, can you c’mere a sec?”

*No no no nononono no can’t won’t never hurt you again gonna hurt you again*, Ranboo shakes his head, knocks his hair across his eyes and stares at the floor, at the scuffed up toes of his boots, knicks and scrapes and scratches gouged into the material, imperfect and dinged up, *just like you*, a voice whispers meanly, blinks then in confusion when another pair of battered boots comes into view.



“I don’t know if you noticed, but my mom’s got this little scar on her right temple.” The toes of that second pair of boots step in between his, one on either side like a stair step, like a weird puzzle that only has two pieces that won’t fit in anywhere else, “A-And *I’m* the one that gave it to her. It was after New Dawn and I just...I was just...I-I wasn’t thinking, I didn’t know she was behind me I just- spun around and flung something-”

*An accident an accident not your fault you’re good you’re kind you’re a decent person not me never like me*, Ranboo wishes he could say, but his mouth is sealed shut, like there’s hands covering it tight, keeping him silent *trying to choke him out*, “I’d never hurt her on purpose and I *know* you’d never hurt me on purpose, Boo. Life’s just...*complicated*, a-and we make mistakes, but it’s okay, I promise it’s okay...that *you’re* okay.”

Heavy sigh and heat pouring off in waves, so tantalizing close but seeming so very very far away, and Ranboo’s helpless swaying forwards *always been helpless always been weak when it comes to him let your guard down so fast like it’s a shield you’re tired of holding*, soft voice murmuring, “Touch good or bad right now, stelledore?”

“A-Always good...always good with you.” He whispers, shaky noise falling out of his mouth once hands slide up over his arms, curl around his waist, steady, solid pressure leaching heat like sunbaked rocks, like a roaring fire, like a woodburning oven in a cluttered kitchen, and he sags bonelessly into that embrace.

*Weak weak weak*, crows at the back of his mind but it starts to fade out, lost under the sensation of hands dragging through his hair, warm face pressed into the crook of his neck, gentle fire bright fingers stroking along his back, and he thinks he’s okay with being weak if this is what he gets, knows no amount of strength would ever be worth more than this.

And maybe that’s why Ranboo finds himself murmuring hoarsely, “I-I’m not o-okay- *my h-head’s n-not okay.*”

*WHAT ARE YOU DOING GOING TO LEAVE YOU DON’T SHOW CAN’T SHOW DON’T LET HIM SEE*, everything screams at once, frantic, panicked hands tearing at him but Ranboo’s tired, plants that shield he’s been carrying for so long in the ground and curls up behind it, “T-There’s...*so much w-wrong with it*, cracks and fissures a-and I don’t *know I-I don’t I-I can’t-*”

His voice cuts out, finally strangled by dread and paranoia and *skeletal hands, real ones wrapping around a second later holding him down holding him in place while he thrashes boot heel crashing down onto his horns over and over and over again until one finally gives finally breaks shatters off just like his screaming voice-*

“*H-Help-*” Ranboo gasps, hands clenching in tight on Tubbo’s back, hanging on desperately like he’s afraid he’s going to disappear, prove this isn’t *real that he’s back there that he never left*, “*Help me, d-don’t leave p-p-please stay A-Ancients stay p-please please stay don’t g-go don’t- don’t l-leave me-*”

“Never leaving you.” Tubbo says ferociously, somehow steps closer, tucks his head until his words are whispering out right at the pulse point on Ranboo’s neck, nose pressed into the

underside of his jaw, “*Never*. There isn’t anything in existence that could make me leave you.”

*Don’t say that don’t mean that doesn’t know didn’t explain make him understand make him see get him to leave you*, feels like a hole’s been punched through his chest, like everything’s leaking out, black tar spreading down from his ribs and Ranboo gasps, “B-But *I’m n-not right*, I-I never will be-”

“I don’t care, you’re right for me-” Promised violently right over where his pulse thuds wild and insane, *just like you just like your mind*, hands in his hair, moving around his horns equally, the normal one and the *broken off ugly craggily thing never gonna be right never gonna be the same*- “-and when I tell you I love you I mean *all of you*, every last piece, even if you hate it, even if you don’t think it’s right.”

Inhales catching in his throat, Ranboo twists his head and buries his face in Tubbo’s hair, in lavender fields and warm earth and *home*, shoulders starting to shake with the sobs building in his chest, teased loose and worked free by the words hushed into his skin, “It’s okay, stelledore, I love you even if you struggle to love yourself right now... I’ll love you enough for the both of us and then some.”

“Y-You’ll stay e-even if-?” Ranboo whispers ragged, can’t seem to get the rest of it out, *even if it’s always like this even if I can’t change even if this is it*, and Tubbo’s fingers find his cariad braid, run down the length of it, “Forever and always, Ranboo.”

And that’s it, Ranboo clicks harshly in the back of his throat, burning sensation racing up his limbs as his knees shake, threaten to collapse out from under him, but Tubbo’s there, he’s got him, strong arms wrapped around his waist, help keep him upright *help keep him here*, and Ranboo just- collapses into it, howls and wails and sobs until he can’t anymore, until his head goes light and fuzzy, until Tubbo sinks with him to the floor and wraps around him like he’s something important.

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**~~Lesson Seventy One: Those Outside the family do not matter, they are simply tools he was your friend~~**

A foot lightly taps into his under the table, *sick jolt in his stomach what have you done slams a door on it*, and not raising his head too much to be obvious, Ranboo cuts his eyes over and likes to think he feels warm amusement flick through him at the little doodle held out in his direction. The paper is quickly shuffled away as their instructor sweeps past, his upturned, snub nosed captured *perfectly* in the crude sketch.

Few more taps into his foot, *trying to hold in laughter*, and Ranboo habitually taps back, *me too me too*, both of them sitting there with stoic expressions as they work through their lessons, but absolutely losing it on the inside. Once the bell rings for the day, Ranboo rises first, everyone else staying seated as he gathers his things, bowing to the instructor on his way out, briefly catching amused green eyes before he exits the room with nausea curling in his throat.

Instead of heading back to his chambers like he's supposed to, Ranboo makes a beeline for one of the courtyards, subtly checking to make sure there isn't anyone watching and teleports straight up to one of the huge statues looming overhead. Behind it's carved cape, there's a small, sheltered space in between it and the palace wall, and Ranboo dumps his things on the ground, ignoring Meleeri as she grouses, *shouldn't be up here shouldn't be with that boy but at least it's almost over at least you did the right thing-*

Ranboo slams a door so hard on her face the entire hallway rattles, dust shaking down on his head while he pants and jostles skeletons loose, *no not yet not now it's just a normal day for now go away*, collapses backwards off his shaky legs, only has a second to compose himself before there's a quiet pop, another body flopping down next to him.

They make eye contact, *normal day normal day one last day*, and Tonsoo loses it, his loud peals of laughter echoing jovially in the small space, and Ranboo attempts to join in, but it sounds hollow no matter what he does. *Get a grip stop thinking enjoy today enjoy it while you can*, he thinks as Tonsoo nudges his shoulder into Ranboo's while they giggle, excitedly pulling out the unflattering doodle of Instructor Rikeek again and that just brings on another round of laughter.

Grinning from ear to ear, *but not to his eyes knows what's happening tomorrow not now shut up-* Ranboo accepts the chorus fruit Tonsoo tosses him, splits it open easily and rolls his eyes as Tonsoo holds his own out, cheersing them together like they're fancy drinks.

"How'd you do on the quarter examination?" Tonsoo asks, scooping out one of the pulpy pods in the center of the fruit, pops it in his mouth as Ranboo swallows his own mouthful, grinning smugly as he announces, "Ninety-nine, Rikeek wouldn't score me higher or he'd be in danger of being accused of brown nosing."

"Wha-!" Tonsoo exclaims mouth falling open, and Ranboo's getting better about smothering things, but can't stop the pleased huff that leaves him, ears flickering ever so slightly as Tonsoo sighs, "You're actually a genius, Ranboo, I have no idea how you do it."

"Superior genes." Ranboo simpers and Tonsoo snorts, flicking a shiny black seed at him, and they drift to talking about other things while they finish their snacks, know it won't be long before they're both noticed missing. Usually, they have half an hour at most, but today, today Ranboo works through his chorus fruit painfully slow, isn't even halfway done by the time Tonsoo is.

"You feeling alright? You've barely even touched yours!" He comments with a laugh, already turning to grab the new textbooks out of his bag, heralding the end of their visit, *no no too soon not yet didn't have enough time can't have why did you shouldn't have done it have to undo it CAN'T shut UP-* and Ranboo lurches forwards, grabbing him on the arm to still his movements.

"I-I don't have anywhere to be s-so *stay-* at least a l-little longer?" Ranboo stammers, mentally screaming at himself for the stutter he can't seem to shake, and Tonsoo's brows rise in shock, surprised at how forward Ranboo's being, and he drops his hand quickly like it's been burned.

“Is...is everything okay?” Tonsoo asks, blessedly turning back around and *it's not it's not things haven't been right in so long sorry so sorry I didn't mean to not true I had to you wouldn't understand*, and Ranboo nods his head, *lie lie lie lie*, friendly smile on his face, *lie lie so sorry so sorry lie*, says ever so pleasantly, “Of course! I just enjoy your company is all.”

*I do I do I do not a lie Ancients I'm so sorry had to didn't want to she forced my hand*, swallows harshly feeling claws prick at his neck, the memory of a nightmare looming over him *should know better than to cross me little brother*, the suspicious looks he's been getting from staff from the guards, hears their whispers the pity *the scorn, what's wrong with him did you hear tantrums and voices and delusions not right something wrong with that one*, sinks his claws into his arms to stop *thinking*.

“I enjoy your company as well, but mother will notice my absence if I stay too much longer.” Tonsoo says brightly and turns back to fish the new tomes free, eagerly handing over two thick medical textbooks that Ranboo takes with wooden hands, confused little smile on Tonsoo's face as he laughs, “Don't tell me *you* forgot to bring the others back? Well that's okay, I'm sure father won't notice if they're gone another day.”

*No he won't he won't be worried about much of anything actually* and Ranboo can only sit there, fear and terror and *what have you done* swallowing him like a wave, but *he didn't have a choice*, between the increasing doctor's appointments and pointed questions and constant observations *he's losing it*, proving the whispers more right every day that passes.

*Did you hear claw marks on his walls maids catch him talking to things that aren't there always something wrong with that one something wrong in his head it's in that eye can't you see*, and behind every whispered word is a cruel smile and sharp claws and the searing light of the Moontide circlet, *should know better shouldn't mess with my things know your place*, the threat of being sent away, *of being institutionalized*, hanging over his head like an executioner's blade.

*He didn't have a choice HE DIDN'T-*

Ranboo's not crazy, *he's not*, every child has imaginary friends, *but you're not a child anymore too old for these kind of games*, Meleeri scolds and she's right, but *he's so lonely*, aching burn in his throat and chest, would go whole days without anyone uttering a word to him if not for the companions in his head, *until Tonsoo but you're going to ruin that lose the only real friend you have no no NO HE DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE HE HAD TO DO THIS HE HAD TO HE He he h-he can't handle this A-Ancients help him w-what has h-he d-done w-w-what has h-he D-DONE-*

Screaming searing pain in his head, *have to block it off have to wall it all off remember your lessons don't need him don't need anyone*, doors slamming fast and tight keeping it all out and Ranboo can breathe he can *think, he doesn't feel anything-*

“You...sure you're okay, Ran?” Tonsoo asks in what sounds like genuine concern, *does he care does it matter you don't you don't care about anyone have to do this have to do this it's already been done*, and Ranboo tilts his head in a vapid smile as he gets to his feet, absolutely nothing in him when he says, “Of course! I'll see you tomorrow.”

He won't.

At breakfast the next morning, sitting at the ninth spot away from father, Reshaa and her husband to his immediate right and left, *future Queen and Consort to the Queen*, it's little more than a passing comment amongst the quiet clink of cutlery and glassware, *the Chief Medical Officer and his family have relocated up north due to unforeseen personal matters a new Chief will be chosen at the next council meeting*, and Ranboo works on not throwing up in front of everyone.

*He's gone he's gone they all are what did you do what have you done how much blood is on your hands had to do it had to had to had to-* Ranboo pushes congealing food around on his plate while he keeps his head bowed, pain grinding his bones together as *her* authoritative voice praises, *good boy good job did what you had to protected the line protected the family's reputation they can't have a prince in the nuthouse*, but that's not why he did it *but it doesn't matter they're all gone and he wants to be gone too*.

He catches Reshaa's eyes on the way out and her's narrow the slightest, *well played concede for now*, spinning on her heel to follow after father, but Ranboo knows this isn't over, that he's only temporarily slapped a patch on the problem. *Bought time but how much and at what cost*, Ranboo's head roils on his way to class, hands clenched tight around his bag strap, keeps rubbing his fingers together expecting there to be *blood*.

The seating charts have been quietly reshuffled in class and Ranboo finds himself next to a new, tight-lipped son of someone he should care about, the boy offering him nothing but bland pleasantries as he takes his seat, *like they've been sitting next to each other all year*. It's eerie, it's terrible, *he hates it*, sits there and gouges lines into the underside of the table, reality spinning around him like a top, everything feeling like a fever dream but he can't remember the last time he's slept.

Companions whisper in his ears all day, dragging his focus off everything that's happening *out there*, *Meleeri won't stop praising him for his duty to the line protect the family at all costs-*

wasn't a choice didn't do it for them scared didn't want to go *not crazy*

*-Reshaa keeps whispering cruel things in his ear insane everyone can see it delayed the inevitable-*

he's not crazy *he's not leave me alone he's just lonely it's not- h-he's NOT*

*-father never responds stands facing the other way turning a blind eye to it all-*

I'm here I'm here pay atten- **PAY ATTENTION TO ME** *don't you see what's happening* **HELP ME**

*-a score of other echoing voices he can't pick out but that demand his attention*, and Ranboo *can't do that anymore*, he's got to keep them all locked away, can't run the risk of having to go back for another psyche evaluation.

It was hard enough this time, like scraping by on the skin of his fangs, getting all the recent medical files and prognoses declared suspect, *including his little slip of paper recommended treatment: institutionalization like it meant nothing written by a different hand but guided by Reshaa's*, took weeks obtaining the amount of forged evidence needed to get the Chief Medical Officer declared a traitor to the Empire, *orchestrating his quiet removal destruction of his files including Ranboo's the imprisonment or execution of his entire family leave no evidence no trace got them all killed-*

*G-Got them-*

*GOT tHEM- G-GOT THEM-*

*GOTTHEMGOTTHEMGOTTHEMGOTTHEM-*

Ranboo hunches over and loses what food he's managed to choke down today, *execution execution it was you it was you walked them there lead them up the steps STOP IT-* wind loud and wailing in his ears where he's hiding up on the parapets, *special spot hiding place like behind the statue you okay Ran*, nobody within earshot to hear him as he tips his head back and screams.

*Murderer murderer horrible thing wretched child no point to you being here come with us come back with us*, the things inside his mind howl, *skeletal faces blackened bones three more this time*, feels like there's hands on him dragging him back dragging him down *down to where everything he doesn't want to see is hiding*, bag over his shoulder suddenly weighing ten thousand pounds medical books he'll never return still inside, *terrified faces dead bodies black blood spilling across floors Y O'U-KA I-I E'D Y O'U-R F-R-I-E-N-D-*

And with a horrific screech, Ranboo hurls his bag over the side of the parapets, slams into the edge with hands braced on the cold, slick stone, shoulders jumping while he heaves, sick wrong and sour in his mouth, stares dead as he watches his things flutter everywhere, books tumbling through the sky, shudders out an exhale that drips with bile and thinks for half a second that it looks nice.

That it looks *freeing*.

--

"Are you *sure* you want to do this?"

Ranboo glances up from the notes he's still sifting through, ears flicked out flat to the sides with an unimpressed look on his face as an answer, and Tubbo holds all his hands up in surrender, "Okay, okay! Sorry...just wanted to double check-"

"Octuple check you mean." Ranboo reminds him saccharine sweet, taps the rest of Lez's papers into a single stack and tucks them away in his bag, eyes running over the slit thin, towering entrance in front of them, sections of monolithic stones toppled over by snares of ruby red vines.

“Dude. Come on. I’m just trying to be considerate.” Tubbo grumbles, kicking at loose clods of earth with the toe of his boots, his own pack slung across his shoulder, and Ranboo ducks his head, regret and frustration swamping through him, mumbles, “Sorry, m’just...I-I’m really okay, you don’t need to keep...*checking*. I’m fine, I can do *this*.”

It’s been a few hours now and Ranboo doesn’t exactly feel better but he’s certainly felt worse, mostly feels like he has an entire wad of cotton stuck in his head, making everything muzzy and slow. That’s not like him, usually his mind is quick and sharp and moves too fast for him to keep up with, but it feels unnaturally sedated right now, unsure about...everything really.

*Do you want to be here doing this don’t know never not know don’t wanna go back though also don’t want to stay don’t want your room don’t want to be anywhere want to just stop existing for a moment catch your breath-*

Gravel crunches softly under Tubbo’s boots as he walks closer, angles his head so Ranboo can see the little furrow in his brow, *thinking through something problem he wants to solve good luck cariad*, “I keep asking because I care about you, not because I don’t think you can handle it, okay?”

*Sympathy in his eyes now but how soon until that turns to pity*, Reshaa whispers over his shoulder, voice cold and shivery like high altitude winds, drapes across him with all the frozen heavy weight of a lonely night, *how long until he looks at you like we all looked at you like you’re some sad broken thing shade of a person little shadow on the wall nothing worthwhile in you*, and Ranboo swallows hard, says, “Well then *trust me* when I say I’m okay.”

Tubbo still doesn’t look super convinced, *what’s he thinking when’s he gonna start looking at you different his poor nutso partner*, and Ranboo’s tail lashes quick in irritation, words coming out harsher and angrier than he wants, “You always demand I treat *you* the same but won’t do that for *me*. Do you think I’m too *pathetic* or something? Some, poor, pitiable thing that needs to be *rescued* from-?”

“No! Stop making shit up! You *know* I don’t think that.” Tubbo snaps, voice raising in volume like thunderheads building in summer skies, dark, dangerous look in his eyes as his hands clench and Ranboo tracks the movement, heart stuttering and tripping in his chest *sees the way they swing at him in his memories skin splitting and hurting taste of blood in his mouth*.

But it stops there, Tubbo uncoiling out of the stance he was storming into, relaxing two palms to drag down his face, breathes in deep and lets it go, moves his hands to grip the back of his neck, “S-Sorry...I-I’m sorry for implying I didn’t think you could handle this. I care about you a lot, I just...want you to be safe...s-so I’m trusting you, okay? To be telling me the truth?”

He’s looking up at Ranboo with regret pulling his mouth down, concern furrowing his brows, anger and love and worry all warring in his eyes, such a complicated mess of things, but Ranboo can’t judge because he’s the same, only difference he keeps everything locked away inside, hidden behind a never ending passageway of walls and doors.

“Thank you for apologizing, I’ll...let you know i-if I need anything.” Ranboo offers, really hopes he’s not lying, rocks forward awkwardly on his toes and hesitantly cups Tubbo’s face, fingers trailing back to thumb at the braid he just redid a few hours ago, “Sorry for being a bitch.”

“Oh so you’re apologizing for every interaction we’ve ever had?” Tubbo teases lightly, and that’s more a comfort than anything, that he’s still willing to joke around and poke and prod, like he knows Ranboo isn’t going to break apart instantly.

“You should count your blessings to even *know me*.” Ranboo adopts a fake huffy tone, sticking his nose ridiculously high in the air because he knows it’ll make Tubbo laugh, is rewarded with the lovely peals of it not a second later, continues on, “Protest all you like, but I bring such enrichment and fulfillment to your otherwise bland and *boring* existence. I am a joy to know.”

Ranboo’s joking, he is one hundred and ten percent full of shit, doesn’t mean a word, but then Tubbo smiles at him sincerely, stepping way into his personal space, which is the furthest thing from a problem, and reaches up, tapping him lightly on the nose, “You’re right, you absolutely are a joy. Now come on, stelledore, before it gets too dark.”

Staring after his retreating back like he’s just been given a concussion, Ranboo really can’t figure out what he’s ever done to warrant having Tubbo in his life, *as his friend as his cariad*, jumps to attention when Tubbo laughingly calls back at him to hurry up, teleports in a blink to his side at the mouth of the temple.

“Show off.” Tubbo grins, elbowing him in the ribs gently, and Ranboo snorts, rolling his eyes as they start down a dark, narrow hallway, greyish stone rising high above them. The temple architecture feels like an animal crouched in waiting, all long reedy shapes like the people that built it, thin, slitted windows letting in watery light and highlighting strange designs carved into its surface.

As they walk down the main corridor, boots scuffing loudly in an oppressively muffled silence, Ranboo runs his hand along the carved lines that swirl together tightly like fingerprints, claws tracing through the grooves and dips in the stone. He keeps checking Lez’s notes as they go, referencing where they are in relation to her clean sketches, starts building a mental map of the whole complex.

“Main chamber should be just down here...” He mumbles to himself, eyes squinting at the page as he rotates it to match their surroundings, whips around frantically when he hears a panicked shout behind him, “Tubbo-!”

“I-I’m okay! Just tripped!” Tubbo calls, though he seems to be having trouble righting himself, hand flailing around a lot before it finally lands on a wall, and Ranboo realizes what’s wrong the same time as Tubbo says, “Shit, it’s dark in here though.”

Ranboo hadn’t noticed the loss of light, eyes actually feeling better than they normally do, relaxing in the dim environment, but Mellifera don’t have night vision, their eyes specifically developed to handle *a lot of light*, and he asks softly, “You okay? Do you need a flashlight?”



“No...probably, maybe.” Tubbo relents but makes no move to pull one out, and with understanding, Ranboo sighs in exasperation, “Did you *pack one*?”

“...maybeee?” Tubbo drawls, starts blindly digging around in his own pack, pushing past plenty of things that are not a flashlight, *spare clothes rations tool kit medical supplies is that an orange*, makes a noise of triumph and holds up a cylindrical shaped object, “Ha! *See!* I know what I’m doing.”

“Tubbo.”

“Yeah?”

“That’s a thermos.” Ranboo says, desperately trying not to laugh at the way Tubbo brings the thermos as close to his face as he can get, squints at it like that’s going to help him see better, “Really? Well fuck me I guess.”

Rolling his eyes, *doofus doofus love him so much*, Ranboo starts back the way they came, “Alright well, come on. Might as well head back now.”

“What? No!” Tubbo protests, swings in the correct direction Ranboo’s in but fails horribly trying to grab for him, “We already- hey, where’re you, c’mere...thank you. Okay look, we already walked all the way out here, I’ll just use my handheld or something.”

“Great a whole four minutes of battery life.” Ranboo teases, smiling at Tubbo when he shakes his arm in annoyance, fingers wrapped warm and grounding around his forearm, “No! I charged it during the flight, bitch, fuck off.”

“Mmm hmm, I’ll believe it when I see it.” Ranboo drawls and then squints as a blinding light is suddenly in his face, Tubbo snickering, “Oh what’s the matter, Boo boy? Can’t *see*?”

Well *he can’t now*, but Ranboo uses where Tubbo still has a hand wrapped around him to figure out where he is, lunges forward before he has a chance to counter and merciless tickles at his sides. Tubbo shrieks like he’s being stabbed, flings his handheld out of his grip and it goes clattering off somewhere, throwing insane, bouncing shafts of light around the temple.

Whatever advantage surprise offered Ranboo doesn’t last for long, not much he can do against an extra set of hands, gets put on the defensive really quickly, trying to keep Tubbo’s insistent fingers from his sides, his stomach, anywhere he can reach really. Ranboo’s laughing so hard his chest starts to hurt, muscles aching pleasantly and bones rattling together, and he begs in between rounds of involuntary laughter, “O-Okay- o-o-okay! T-Truce?”

“Mmm, I dunno...” Tubbo drawls, hands stilling in their barrage but still resting ominously on his sides, flexing against the soft material of the t-shirt under his jacket, “What’s in it for me? What you got to offer?”

*Nothing you have nothing no money no resources no connections no information useless and expendable*, comes hissing out from somewhere, unclear if it’s Reshaa or Meleeri, too indistinct, and Ranboo shoves it out an open door, knows that’s not what Tubbo’s getting at.

He's *teasing*, he's poking fun, *he's treating Ranboo like he treats everyone*, and Ranboo forces his voice to be just as light, not shaky and scared like it wants when he offers, "Well... how 'bout I do your laundry for a week?"

"And not have clean laundry for a week? No thanks." Tubbo giggles, hands worming a little higher, and it's more comforting than threatening, has Ranboo relaxing, dipping his head down, watches the way his eyes cast dim light across Tubbo's face, "Want half my pay from this mission?"

"Nah...don't really need to buy anything." Tubbo hums and tilts his head back and forth in thought, antenna bobbing with the action, one of them accidentally dragging across Ranboo's nose, and he works on not sneezing, racks his brain trying to think of something else he can offer Tubbo in exchange, "Um...I could clean the room? O-Or the ship? Uuuhhh...sorry- I-I don't really- what do you want?"

Tubbo gets this impish grin on his face, dimples appearing in his cheeks as he angles his head back, probably trying to go for cocky, looks nothing but a little silly and very lovely to Ranboo as he says, "Your heart."

*Did he just-* and Ranboo's ears shoot up, heat gathering along their tops as they go a dark purple, same color staining his flushed face because that was just- *so stupid and so corny sounding like it came right out of those romance books you pray no one ever catches you reading oh Ancients who says shit like that-*

And Ranboo's *going to laugh it off*, say something like you can't have my organs, but he's apparently an idiot, is thinking about this one scene between two star-crossed carliads he really likes and ends up saying, "Why? You already have it."

*I cannot believe you just said that I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU JUST SAID THAT*, a corner of his mind howls, only rational part left in a sea of writhing embarrassment and turmoil, but before Ranboo can even *try* doing damage control, Tubbo starts laughing, entire face scrunching up in glee.

"Q-Queens past! You're such a *dork!*" He cackles, eyes cracking back open to stare fondly at the general blob of Ranboo in the darkness, hands slipping off him as he takes a step back, "Oooh man that was good. Alright, come on, help me find my handheld you cheeseball."

"Okay..." Ranboo says absentmindedly, turning in something of a daze watching Tubbo stumble off in the dark looking for his handheld, screen timed out by now so he's never going to find it on his own, but Ranboo can't move, rooted to the spot staring after him. *Likes your stupid attempts at humor the dumb way you try and woo him how did you ever end up with someone so incredible*, he thinks adoringly, lips twitching up at Tubbo pinwheeling his arms, only spurred into motion once he hooks a foot on something in the dark and falls over with the loudest *fuck* Ranboo's ever heard.

Ranboo finds the handheld easily enough, presses it from his shaking hands into Tubbo's steady ones, and now armed with a light, Tubbo follows along a lot more confidently, asks Ranboo questions here and there as he swings his handheld around to illuminate creepy looking statues.

“What’s all this for anyway?” He calls, walking around the base of one, staring contemplatively up at its odd face, tries to mimic the pose it’s in, and Ranboo hums, flipping back through his mental records of the notes, “Lez thinks it’s supposed to have been a...not religious, but spiritual maybe? But some monastery-like archive...maybe a temple school of sorts? For training the upcoming archivists.”

“Huh. Is that who this guy is?” Tubbo points up at the statue like Ranboo might not have seen it, all thirty something odd feet of it, sculpted robes cracked and missing chunks but obviously important looking, hands cupped like maybe they held something at one point.

“Most likely.” Ranboo says, wandering out a bit further into the main chamber, remembers Lez saying this was as far as she could get, no entrance or anywhere else to go in sight, just a vaguely trapezoidal room and eight towering statues. *Alright think no doors but that doesn’t mean anything especially if this is some place special*, Ranboo steps lightly over the ground, tightly patterned groups of lines swirling under his feet, *maybe all the lines mean something point the way or they’re a map of sorts soundwaves maybe no doesn’t make any sense non-auditory what if-*

Ranboo jumps about a foot in the air when he hears stone grinding unexpectedly, whips around trying to find the source of the noise, catches the barest glimpse of a pillar disappearing back into the ground, can’t figure out what triggered it but then Tubbo yells, “Sorry! Did I break anything?”

Spinning on his heel, Ranboo sees Tubbo hovering in the air above the statue he’d been pointing at, or more accurately, hovering over its cupped hands, looking down at them guiltily, and it clicks together in Ranboo’s head, “Tubbo! Stand in its hands again!”

“I didn’t *touch* it what’re-! O-Oh! Oh yeah, sure!” Tubbo calls back, wings dropping him to land in the statue’s hands and they depress the slightest, same grating sound accompanying it, and Ranboo looks over his shoulder, pleased as the pillar rises up fully out of the ground this time, “Stay put just a sec, okay, Bo?”

“Righty-o bossman!”

Slinking closer to the pillar, Ranboo minds where he puts his feet in case of traps, but that worry is probably due more to the adventure thrillers he reads rather than any solid logic. The pillar is triangular and made up of the same grey stone as everything else, but where Ranboo thought maybe it’d have something carved in it, it’s just completely blank, all three sides of it, and he makes a few quick circuits, can’t find anything either time.

*Why have this then what’s the point nothing here why have this just a boring stone but wait or not Lez said wake stones store memories is this one*, Ranboo stalls in place and regards the pillar, taller than him but about the right height for a Bossak to rest their hand on the top.

“Welp...” He murmurs, taking a few steps back so he can get a running start, jumps and just barely manages to get his fingertips hooked around the top of it, disappointed when nothing happens but then-

*Same room but a little different, carvings in the floor glowing a warm red, Bossak standing in front of him with an impressive crest of feathered spines, deep, rich color to their robes, and*

*they don't hold out a hand but Ranboo can hear them all the same, voice echoing louder than time quieter than space as they say-*

*When you look into my face, I shall never lie, instead, be but a window into your soul, whether there light or shadows hide, as in me many see their deaths where others see their lives, for though prejudiced to some I may seem, the truth is in their own eyes.*

*-and around him the room wobbles, only stopping when their words do, and they wait patiently, watching him with razor thin eyes, can't figure out what they want but then it's tipping over in his head that they want an answer it's a riddle this is a test and Ranboo runs back through it, imagines the words in front of him and they appear wavering in the air.*

*He combs through them fingers touching at the silvery outlines of the letters, weighing options in his head but there's only one thing it could really be, looking into the heart of things what never lies to you reflects back yourself so painfully accurate, and he looks up at the Bossak archivist squares his shoulders and answers them-*

*The answer is a mirror*

Next thing Ranboo knows he's falling backwards out of the air with Tubbo shouting his name in alarm, brain very disoriented and unable to find any coordinates for him before he hits the ground hard. The impact knocks all the air out of him, but it's a feeling he's used to, body rolling itself up on autopilot. His legs bunch under him in preparation to launch himself across the training mat at Dream, but halts because there's no one there, and Ranboo bends over a little, wheezing air back into his lungs.

"Ranboo!" Tubbo shouts again over the sound of more stone grinding together, rapid whirring a second later that cuts out with a scuffed thud heralding his arrival, two sets of hands immediately on Ranboo trying to steady him, "Fuck, *are you okay?* What happened? Are you hurt?"

"F-Fine, m'fine-" Ranboo huffs, head swimming, spine just starting to protest at the abuse, but he shuts it out, staggers to his feet and grins seeing the towering black slit now open along the far wall, pride glowing warm and bright in his chest as he points at it, "L-Look- did it."

Gaining access to the rest of the temple is easier now that they know what to look for, some sort of physical puzzle that opens up another wake stone which generally has a riddle or philosophical quandary stored inside, and they all require a lot of thinking and working through things and Ranboo starts loving every second of it. He drops to the ground lightly after the latest riddle, hasn't been hung up on any of them so far, tail curling behind him self-satisfied as another passageway opens up, turns to grin at Tubbo and boasts, "I'm smart."

And for once, he actually means it, proud of himself and the way his mind works, basks in the feeling like a cat stretching in a warm patch of sunlight, *did it did it figured it out smart capable quick on your feet love the way you work love that you're mine.* Ranboo can't stop the urge to wrap his arms around himself, and not in a frantic, crushing way, but rather something almost like a hug, excited, contented feeling ruffling up from his feet, tail whipping behind him happily, only seems like a dumb thing to do after it's passed.

He catches Tubbo staring and ducks his head embarrassed, but Tubbo smiles softly, right arms pulling him into a quick hug, rests his head along Ranboo's side and looks up at him adoringly, "Yeah, you are smart. Proud of you, Boo."

*Proud of you proud of you proud of you* follows along after his heels like a cloud of those glowing insects from Apidae, *firebugs*, ethereal and beautiful and suffused with light, and it takes some prompting from Tubbo before Ranboo can even have a brain to try and figure out this next room.

This one immediately sticks out as strange to him, smaller than the others with no statues or anything in sight, just four walls that disappear up into the gloom. Ranboo makes his way hesitantly into the center, does a quick spin but nope, nothing new, just Tubbo poking along one wall with his handheld up above his head, throwing crazy shadows along the carved stone.

*Weird why the abrupt change*, Ranboo wonders, tail swishing behind him in thought, distracted when Tubbo calls, "Think this is it? Like- are we at the end and the magic stone is just gone? Ha! Maybe the *real* magic stone were the friends we made along the way!"

"I don't think so..." Ranboo mutters, ignoring as Tubbo makes a sound of disappointment and swings his handheld around, light catching strangely on the back wall, and Ranboo's eyes narrow, heading over to get a better look. As soon as he's closer, he can see what the difference is, this wall smooth and polished, almost like the surface of a mirror, reflecting back a blurry outline of himself, mismatched eyes glowing in the black shadow of his face.

"Find something?" Tubbo asks behind him and Ranboo flicks his tail unsure, one hand stretching out because he has an idea, *all the other wake stones were freestanding pillars but they were the only smoothed things in here...maybe this is just a huge one.*

"Dunno...maybe." Ranboo calls, hears the crunch of boots coming closer right as his fingertips make contact, palm flattening out to rest on the glassy surface and everything's suddenly gone, feels like a hole's opened up underneath him and he's *falling fal ling fa l ling-*

*Ranboo stumbles on his feet, heart jackhammering in his chest with leftover adrenaline, vertigo making him sick to his stomach and light headed, works on taking even breaths as he stares at the glossy, black floors...floors and tiling patterns he'd recognize anywhere, head snapping up in panic because no no no it's not he's not-*

*But the towering ceilings of Voidfall greet him, sharp lines of geometric pillars and eerie teal light flooded everywhere, gold winking in the gloom like the flash of eyes watching his every step, and Ranboo jerks back, doesn't know how he got here **needs to get out of here right now**, but when he turns around, the hallway's gone and he's standing alone in the throne room.*

*No no no no no no no- he thinks, this isn't happening this isn't real, but everything seems so real the feel of the air the drumming pulse in his veins, and between one blink and the next, there's two figures before him, one standing up on the dais with his back turned, teal cloak falling to his feet, heavy bands of the Daysetter crown curled around silver streaked hair and*

*Ranboo's heart lurches- not him not him not him -swings his gaze to the other and feels the blood freeze in his veins because he knows it knows it like he knows his reflection-*

*Tiny frame of his shoulders tail held stiffly but quivering slightly hands wound up tight behind his back, claws already worrying at skin, little ears pressed as close to his skull as they can get everything about him small and alone and so very painfully afraid*

*-and Ranboo swallows harshly, whips his gaze back up when the figure at the front of the room speaks-*

*'Do you have any idea of what you've done? How this will play out, how it'll look for me, for the rest of us? Or do you only care about yourself?'*

*'I'm sorry' -both Ranboo and his smaller copy plead, guilt crawling up his spine like a thing possessed- 'I didn't mean to! I-It was an accident!'*

*'You're lying.'*

*They both cringe, ducking away from the vile words thrown at them, the figure at the front cutting a hand sharply through the air- 'that's all you do, lie and deceive and lead people astray, you're a cursed thing, unfit to be here, unfit to be called my son.'*

*'N-No! Please! I-I can be good I will be good' -they beg but it's futile, father doesn't want to hear it, bulls over their pleas- 'you are an embarrassment and have disappointed me for the last time, you'll never be anything more than a black mark in the ledger of this family.'*

*Ranboo chokes back the horrible sound he wants to make, shoulders shaking with the force of trying to hold himself still, knows he can behave he can behave he's trying father look at me look at me- but he won't, doesn't move a muscle as he intones- 'From the day you were born I regretted your existence, and you've done nothing since then to prove me wrong. Nothing you have done has ever been worthy of your life, **you** will never be worthy.'*

*The smaller him collapses to his knees sobbing, but Ranboo stays upright, bows his head and digs furious claws into his arms because he knows okay he knows he knows he knows and he tried to get rid of himself once but it failed- **he failed** -but that's all he does isn't it can't do anything right can't be a good son can't be a decent person can't find a purpose can't even kill himself-*

*'You disgust me' -father's voice berates- 'try all you like to outrun this but it's going to follow you for the rest of your life. You're never escaping, and why should you? You deserve to live with this guilt until it consumes you' -and the sobbing suddenly changes in pitch, becomes something Ranboo recognizes like a nightmare, like a slow death, head snapping up in horror to see **Tubbo** knelt on the ground, hands shackled behind him.*

*'No no no no no' -Ranboo whispers, watching the Syndicate bomber melt off his back, replaced with the muddy green of a prison jumpsuit, frantic pain snarling up his insides as father says- 'you get up and lie to yourself every day, say your mistakes don't define you, that it's okay because you regret, well it isn't. It never will be, you're a monster and a criminal and you don't deserve to be here, you don't deserve to be alive.'*

*Tubbo hangs his head, back heaving from the force of his tears, looking so defeated and so downtrodden, no spark or fight left him in at all like he's accepted this, like he's giving up and Ranboo twitches violently, screaming at his father- 'Shut up! Leave him alone! You don't know fucking anything!'*

*But either they can't hear him or don't care, and Ranboo howls like a wounded animal, but it isn't enough to drown out father's voice- 'can't be surprised how it went the way it did...it wasn't even your idea, was it? Just a simple little drone following orders till the end, hmm? A good worker bee that knows his place, doesn't think above his station.'*

*'Shut up! JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!'* Ranboo shrieks trying to lunge forward but he's rooted to the spot, can't seem to make his body work, and he thrashes violently, throne room pulsating around him in time to the frantic beating of his heart.

*'Mindless thing, you're one of millions, you know that?'* Father asks softly, like he's speaking to a child, someone smaller than him, not as smart not as strong like **he's lesser**, 'If you died no one would notice, another would simply step up and that'd be the end of that, you're no one, a dirty little nobody going nowhere-'

*'Stop it! Leave him alone!'* Ranboo yells, body unresponsive mind burning, desperate frantic furious need to move to get across this room to shut him up to **kill him-**

*'-that's why everyone leaves you, that's why no one really loves you. You're forgettable and replaceable and worth nothing in the end. It wouldn't be worth the money it'd take to bury you-'*

*'You fucker! I said LEAVE HIM ALONE!'*

*'-so why bother staying here? No one wants you, everyone would be better off without you and you know it. You could finally do something right in your sad, pathetic excuse of a life by ending it-'*

*Ranboo screams gutturally, finally rips his frozen feet off the floor and goes streaking across the throne room, wind roaring in his ears and terrible anger destroying him from the inside out, like a thousand horrid, clawed things are trying to scratch their way out of his chest, breaking free to rip the man in front of him to shreds-*

*Hurt him hurt him hurt him howls in his mind like a fatal sandstorm, crashes under his skin like war drums because how dare he how dare anyone say those things to Tubbo, to look at him and see anything less than what he is, belittle and demean and disgrace such a proud, caring, wonderful person, and all that anger is about to come frothing out of him, spilling free like toxic gas from fumaroles in the earth's surface.*

*Ranboo launches himself up the dais, latches his claws into his father's shoulder and spins him around, other fist cocked back and shooting straight towards his face, aiming to break his nose knock out his teeth hurt him wound him maim him but comes grinding to a stop, arm trembling with the effort taking to hold himself still, fury that's been bubbling inside washing over him like a vile cresting wave because that's not his father.*

*It's him.*

*It's his face his nose his mouth his mismatched eyes all staring back at Ranboo placidly, like he doesn't have a care in the world, like he hasn't been standing here ripping Tubbo to shreds, taking him out at the knees, dismantling him like only Ranboo knows how to do and he staggers back, panic flaring sharp in his chest, feels like his bones are collapsing inwards.*

*'W-What' -he stammers, staring at this copy of himself, **this reflection of himself**, vision starting to shake because no, n-no- NO! NO THIS ISN'T HIM HE WOULDN'T HE WOULD NEVER-*

*'But you did' -the other corrects, sweeping down off the dais like dark clouds moving to blot out the sun, gold dripping from his ears and capping his horn, Daysetter crown heavy on his brow but he holds his chin high like he's proud of this- 'don't you remember? You looked him dead in the eyes and reminded him of how worthless he is, dug your claws in and pulled at his seams, unraveled him because that's what he **deserves-**'*

*'SHUT UP!' Ranboo screams, hands coming up to clutch at his head because this isn't real, **this isn't can't be**, he loves Tubbo Tubbo loves him he'd never hurt him never say these things to him and o-okay maybe he did once but he's better he won't EVER again-*

*'Are you sure about that?' Whispers slow and silky, and Ranboo digs his claws in harsher, wants to wake up, **wants to get the fuck out of here this isn't real-** 'you've seen it yourself, how quickly you backslide, how easily you go back to your old ways...don't you wonder why that is?'*

*'N-No stop go away-'*

*'You do it so much...maybe it's not actually backsliding-'*

*'Shut up shut up shut up shUT UP SHUT UP-'*

*'-maybe it's just who you really are' -his voice is getting closer, echoing less, sounds like it isn't being spoken aloud, but rather clamoring in his mind like it's inside him **like it is him-** 'you've said it before...corrupted fruit doesn't fall far-'*

*'L-Leave me alone! L-Leave m-me- a-al-al-!' Ranboo tries to scream but his voice won't work, fading out because it's not his, **his** voice is speaking across the room, **inside his head knew the truth know the truth always known**, and he bares his fangs in a desperate wail, sinking to his knees, everything around him whispering-*

*You know at your core who you are-*

*GO AWAY GO AWAY-*

*-a liar-*

*STOP IT THAT'S NOT I-I'M NOT-*

*-a manipulator-*



NO NO N-NO N-NO ANCIENTS STOP NO-

**-an abuser-**

*Ranboo howls, spinning to his feet fast claws lashing out aiming for eyes for jugulars for anything he can tear into, to stop this to get rid of it to kill the thing that spoke aloud the words that've been haunting him since the beginning, **since his birth**, but they rip through empty air, nothing here but himself and the smooth polished surface of a mirror, reflecting back the image of him in his father's clothes.*

*No, my clothes m-my clothes MY CLOTHES- Ranboo realizes in mounting dread, panic and desperation squeezing him like a vice threatening to crush him out of existence because he's them, he became them, **he was always them he can't be he won't no n-no NO N-NO-** brings his claws crashing down into his arm and tears a massive weeping line open, blood pouring out in thick rivulets, make his claws slip as he slashes through his other arm.*

*He can't see it as his blood splashes onto the floor, blends in to the glossy black tiles but he tore deep and it's a lot and his head starts to feel light pretty quickly, body losing sensations as he stumbles to his knees, falling forwards and straight through the floor, disappearing down into an endless black void, tumbling through nothingness with freefall twisting his gut distantly hopes he hits the ground soon closes his eyes and-*

*-lurches upright gasping for air, body shaking like a leaf from blood loss and soon soon soon, but when he feels at his arms there's no blood, and Ranboo looks down in a daze, chest crumpling under the force of still being here of still breathing, presses his thumb in harshly to the smooth underside of his wrist and *doesn't understand*-*

*"Hey, you okay?" Ranboo jerks his head up sloppily, stares into a smiling face but can only see *his head bowed in grief defeated set to his shoulders you put that there you did that to him hurt him made him feel worthless your cariad your sunshine and you begged him to kill himself*, and bile races up his throat as Tubbo laughs, "Finally get stumped, huh? Nothing opened this time so- *w-what the fuck!*"*

*Tubbo launches himself up as Ranboo pitches to the side and vomits, sobbing as he does it, *you're an abuser you're an abuser you're an abuser* rolling in his head like a mad distorted echo, but it cements itself into his bone marrow, settling in and making a home like it's something he's always known, like it's his heritage, like it's *inevitable*.*

--

**Lesson Three: You do not belong to yourself and neither did she**

*Ranboo's never seen Voidfall this swept up in something before, hides in the shadow of a pillar and stares out at the chaotic stream of servants rushing past, has to readjust the circlet that keeps slipping down his forehead, can't wait until he gets his proper one in the next two years.*

*The palace has been tenser than usual with the wedding looming on the horizon, but now that the day's here, it's all exploded, everyone scurrying around like when you kick an endermite*

nest out in the wastes. Heads of the Household get short with their staff, lose all sense of decorum without the nobility around to keep them in check, toss their hands about and rail on, and so far, there's been six servants sent home for the day, another eighteen driven to crying, and Ranboo tracks all of it with interest.

*So that one with the crooked nose has favor with the Head of Housecare, from tone of voice and lingering looks it's not just for being good at their job no braids in their hair but can the peasants really afford beads anyway,* Ranboo thinks, tail curling behind him as he peers out around the side of the pillar, eyes eagerly taking everything in, mind more than happy storing all the new information for him.

It may seem trivial, but nothing in Voidfall ever is, a complicated dance Ranboo's been tirelessly learning, knows that the goings on of the mice that scuttle back and forth behind the walls is just as important as the nobility that laugh and scheme out on the dancefloor. Feet come scuffling down the hall fast, and Ranboo ducks out of view, ear flicking at the hushed conversation that rushes past, only catches a snippet of it, "-don' know *what* to do, i-it's worse than usual, *she's completely out of it-*"

They're gone before Ranboo can hear anymore, and since no one can see him, he pouts, ears flicked out flat in irritation because that sounded interesting. *What to do what to do want to know more follow after them bad idea too obvious go the way they came no too many possibilities,* he taps his fingers together and apart while he thinks, sees two maidservants come out of an adjoining hallway with concerned sets to their faces, heads bent together while they gossip and gets an idea.

Standing up straight, Ranboo neatens his clothes and irritably pushes the stupid, improperly fitting juvenile circlet back up, steps out from behind the pillar and walks with purpose towards the two maidservants, fixes his face in a mask of concern when he goes up to them.

"Excuse me?" He asks softly, worried lilt he adds to his voice to maybe draw on their sympathies, almost loses it though when they don't acknowledge him right away, and he has to raise his voice, "*Excuse me?*"

"O-Oh! Your highness we were just-" One of them starts, but Ranboo cuts over her, like he's very harried, burdened with distress about the situation, "No, no, it's alright, I know how worried everyone must be...I heard it was worse than usual today."

Ranboo hopes his idea works, that playing along will get him somewhere, but if not, he's already got a backup story that'll cover his tracks nicely, *heard how mean the Heads are being poor peasants boohoo*, that sort of thing, but he thinks he's hit on something when the girls whip to look at one another.

"Y-You know about that?" The one with the headscarf whispers, *bingo*, and Ranboo works on not grinning in victory as he nods his head, hands clasped in front of him like he's very distraught over the whole thing, "Of course, it's a very distressing matter...and please, keep this between us, but I am ever so worried. I heard she was completely out of it and I...just wanted to make sure she was okay, please, do you know anything?"

The two of them look at each other quickly, seem to have some kind of silent discussion, but headscarf turns back to him and relents, “Mistress is...a little overwhelmed with the day’s activities is all-”

*“Ancients of the Deep! He’s her brother just-”* The other rudely cuts in with and Ranboo immediately dislikes her, but then he registers what she said, *her brother me she means me it’s one of my sisters*, and he stands bolt upright as the girl continues, “Please, your highness, but the heiress is having difficulties today, is there anything you could do or...?”

*Reshaa she’s talking about Reshaa*, Ranboo realizes stunned, actual worry starting to bubble up because *that’s his sister he cares for her but she picks on you but its deserved is it though she’s my sister she’s family care for her but does she care for you ugh go away-* knows the fear is leaking out into his voice as he stammers, “W-What’s wrong w-with her?”

“It’s just a bad day, your highness.” Headscarf says, cutting her eyes away when he turns to look at her frantically, *stop it look at me stop it pay attention this is important this is about Reshaa what does she mean bad days Reshaa is perfect always the best always on top of things what’s wrong what’s wrong what’s happened is she sick is it like mama-*

And Ranboo’s heart jumps painfully, fear snarling up his insides thinking about Reshaa wasting away in a bed with a dozen machines hooked up to her, b-but he can help, read every book in the palace library on medicine, *he can help he can help this time*, darts forward and practically begs the maidservant to tell him where she is.

No one bothers him on the way to Reshaa’s quarters, situated further up in the family block than his own as befitting her title, but when he gets closer to her room, Ranboo does notice servants watching him out of the corners of their eyes, slows his pace and purposefully walks past her door, eyes narrowing seeing them all tense and then unwind.

*Don’t want me in there would stop me if I tried what’re they hiding could order them but then they might get father and don’t wanna upset him don’t want him involved*, Ranboo thinks, disappearing around the corner, mind already pulling up his internal map of Voidfall, the relative coordinates, does quick mental math and darts behind a pillar right as he winks out of existence, stepping smoothly out into the center of a dimly lit room.

Ranboo hasn’t been in any of his siblings’ rooms much, least of all Reshaa’s, but he’s fairly sure it doesn’t usually look like *this*, clothes flung all over the place, furniture upturned and in disarray, papers scattered around, and when he takes a cautious step forwards, broken glass crunches under his boots.

*By the Ancients what happened assassins thieves kidnappers terrorist no no palace guards would know it’s okay she’s okay*, Ranboo tries to calm himself and swallows the panic down, voice shaking as he hesitantly calls out, “R-Reshaa?”

There’s a soft noise and his ears flick, *over there the bed*, sees in his mind *mother fading away machines plugged into her arms only barely keeping her alive*, and rushes over, fingers working themselves into knots at the sight of Reshaa splayed out, normally tidy hair half swallowing her face in a monstrous tangle.

“R-Reshaa?” He calls again, shifting nervously at her bedside, eyes fixed on the way her chest shallowly rises and falls *just like mama struggling to breathe is she gonna die are you gonna watch the light fade out of her eyes too*, whimpers in the back of his throat and reaches a shaky hand out, tugging lightly on her arm, “Honored sister...Reshaa- *Re-Reshaa!* RES!”

That gets her to respond, and she groans, body moving sluggishly on the bed, head rolling to the side and from in between snarls of black hair, a glowing green eye creaks open. “Ooooh, *great.*” Reshaa says, voice slow and syrupy, unlike anything Ranboo’s ever heard, and he drops her arm fast, folds his hands behind his back as her eye narrows, “If it isn’t the *baaaaby*, lil’...goooolden boy himself. Wha’ do you want? Can’t you see I’m buuusy...”

“S-Sorry for waking you, I-I just-”

“I-I-I uh, I-I-I um, u-uh- *shut uuuup...Ancients*, your voice is just- *the worst.*” Reshaa snaps, rolling to sit up, head hanging low between her shoudlers as she sways a bit erratically, glaring at Ranboo from under a mass of tangled hair, “Every time you open that- *stupid mouth* of yours it makes my head ache, learn to *shut up* and then maaaaybe I’ll like you more.”

“Sorry...” Ranboo whispers, all he trusts himself to say evenly, and drops his eyes to stare at the toes of his boots as Reshaa scoffs, her voice pitching up to mimic his, “*S-Sorry! S-S-Sorry! Ancients* that’s all you ever say, sorry sorry sorry, like a little broken recording, skipping its track...but it fits doesn’t it. It’s you, isn’t it? A *sad...broken little thing-*”

Reshaa giggles, quick rustling that has Ranboo lifting his head, sees her trying to get up but she must not be feeling well, tipping to the side unbalanced, and he rushes forward to try and steady her, suddenly reels backwards at the sharp crack of a palm striking his cheek.

“*Don’t touch me!*” Reshaa shrieks, hand raised threateningly like she’s going to do it again, and Ranboo’s quick to back up, one hand clutched against his burning face as Reshaa stumbles out of bed, hits her nightstand and knocks an entire slew of small, rattling plastic bottles onto the floor, “*D-Don’t-! Don’t you ever touch me! Don’t you- and s-stop! Stop looking at me like that!* Her eyes- how do you- i-it’s- I said *STOP IT!*”

Ranboo breaks eye contact quickly, sniffing loudly because he doesn’t know what he’s *done wrong*, he was just worried about her so *why did she hit him it hurts she’s his sister she’s supposed to care about him but then why did she hit him it hurts why why why he cares about her why*, cries quietly to his feet, “S-Sorry- s-sorry, *sorry-!*”

Her inarticulate noise of anger drowns out his apologies, and Ranboo flinches when there’s a hand yanking him around roughly, arm like a vice over his shoulders as Reshaa drags him to a corner of her room, positions him forcefully in front of a giant mirror that has a spider web of cracks running through it, pieces of it breaking under his boots as she jostles him.

“There, there we go *little broken recording-*” Reshaa hisses, looming over him with her hands braced on his shoulders, keeping him in place, *won’t let him go claws digging in sharply*, “*There we go-* let’s take a little- *LOOK*, s-shall we? Hmm? Hmm? Does that sound nice? Stick you in front of here and *point out all your flaws?*”

“I-I-” Ranboo stammers, has no idea what’s happening, why Reshaa’s acting like this, stares in abject fear as she sways back and forth, pupils blown wide and unseeing in her eyes as she grins at him, “Oooh, there he goes again, little broken record, *little horrible broken thing*. No one wanted you, you know? *Last of eight*, of course they didn’t want you, *you were a mistake little brother-*”

All the moisture leaves his mouth in an instant, heart starting to pound fast and loud in his veins but that can’t be *true it can’t mama always said*, but Reshaa laughs, takes a hand and grips his chin harshly, drags his head back to the mirror, forces him to make eye contact with his reflection. “Nooow...” She coos, other hand coming up to rake hair out of his face, displacing the ill-fitting circlet with her harsh ministrations, “Now where to begin? Oh, I know, easy spot, so, so, *easy*, this right here. Ha! Staring you right in the eyes isn’t it.”

Her claw comes dangerously close to poking him in his left eye, and Ranboo flinches back, tail whipping behind him as Reshaa cackles, claws around his chin digging in dangerously as she jerks his head back, “Now, now, Ran, no need to run *n-no need to hiiiiide*. Everyone can see it ya’know, *how wrong you are*, a-and it’s right here, right in this horrid little eye of yours, nasty, ugly thing aren’t you?”

Ranboo stares at his reflection, never really thought that much about it before, but as Reshaa *keeps going- your ears are too big nose doesn’t sit right in your face teeth crooked one fang bent at an angle horns pitting in weird places*, he starts to feel ashamed, gross, writhing feeling in his gut as he stares into his own eyes, the correct one and the *horrid wrong nasty ugly one is there something wrong with him has to be why is he like this what’s wrong with him-*

“You’re *r-repulsive*, ha! No one cares about you, no one’s ever going to...to l-love you, *h-how could t-they!*” Reshaa laughs, hands smoothing down his face to rest threateningly on the sides of his neck, bends over and rests her head against his, whispering scratchy and angry against his ear, “Bet they’d l-let *you* m-marry whoever you want, give you his- *fucking blessing*, a- already got *her BEAD-*”

He yelps in pain as her fingers tighten out of nowhere, claws breaking through his skin in a few places, forces himself quiet when she shakes him roughly, voice pitching up sharply, “*S-SHUT UP!* I don’t want to *hear it!* *You-* stupid, *fucking* little golden boy, mommy’s favorite- *why! WHY-* why why why were *you* *her f-favorite!* H-How-! You c-can’t talk, you’re an *i-idiot*, can’t do *a-anything-* y-you’re- *just the worst!*”

Ranboo doesn’t expect her to shove him, goes tripping to the ground and cries out as his hands slam harshly into the floor, turns a trembling palm over and panics seeing black blood oozing out, dangerous shine of pieces of glass embedded in his skin, whips his head up as he hears Reshaa scream, “You’re worth nothing! *You never have been!* D-Do you hear me you little shit? *No one c-cares about you-! NONE OF THEM DO!*”

He scrabbles away from her, hot sting of more glass cutting into his hands, and Reshaa stumbles after him barefoot, hands slicing through the air erratically, hair flying around while she rears her head, “WHAT MAKES YOU SO SPECIAL! W-Why do *you* g-get e-everything *I-I WANT!* *You’re absolutely worthless! But you t-took E-EVERYTHING FROM ME!* Nobody wants you! *THEY NEVER HAVE-!*”

“T-That’s not true! Mama wanted me!” Ranboo screams back at her, bleeding hands clutched to his front where he’s pinned, burning pain throbbing out of them combining with the constricting agony in his chest, makes each inhale hurt as he wails, “*S-She did! She told me! I-I KNOW SHE DID-!*”

“What would you EVER know about her!” Reshaa yells, foot lashing out at him but she stumbles, goes crashing to the ground and it gives time for Ranboo to scramble away, sobbing as she shrieks, “*You FUCKING KILLED HER!*”

Ranboo howls, *no he didn’t no he didn’t no hE DIDN’T HE DIDN’T NO NO NO NO-* wants to get out of here, *needs to get out of here has to get out get away from her*, is forcing his way through reality without any thought, comes tripping out of his jump and slams into a wall, reality reeling around him as flees down the hall.

His lungs scream for air as he races through teal lit corridors, sobs bubbling up out of his throat like noxious gasses out in the wastes, lightheaded and delirious to the point none of this feels real, because she’s *wrong he didn’t he never did it wasn’t him it wasn’t him he didn’t kill her hE DIDN’T HE COULDN’T NO NO N-NO N-NO NONONONO-*

*Horrid thing killed her you killed her it was you it was all your fault*, hisses in his mind, sharp bite of claws at his shoulder, and Ranboo squeezes his eyes shut, frantic to get away from *there*, but it’s like it’s gone with him, the memory of Reshaa hanging off him like a nightmare he can’t wake up from, wails hearing her murmur, *good you deserve this never forget that you little mistake*.

And he never does.

--

Time slows to a crawl, huge stretches of crackling grey static spacing out brief blinks of black nothingness where everything’s finally quiet, where he can forget he exists, where he can *pretend he’s dead*.

Those fleeting moments of unconsciousness are the only things keeping him moving, reality pushing him to the brink every agonizing second it drags on, but then fatigue will finally yank him under before he takes that step over the side, smother everything so he forgets briefly, when he wakes up, that *he doesn’t want to be here anymore*.

Coming out of sleep is the best time of the day, a few short minutes of blissful confusion that always get destroyed as everything else comes roaring back in, tearing at his insides, ripping his veins to shreds, splintering his sense of self to the point that Ranboo loses the idea of where he begins and where nothing ends, starts to think they’re one and the same.

He’s been awake for...he doesn’t know how long actually, but that hazy feeling has long faded and he’s been staring blankly at the grey wall by his bunkside, losing seconds, hours, *years maybe* to the sinking, dragging pit in the center of his being. Breathing hurts, blinking hurts, *living hurts*, the thought of getting up impossible, only thing that sounds halfway appealing is the comfort sleep brings, *the desperation at knowing the relief of death would be better but he’d have to get up and can’t*.

The bed behind him dips as a body shuffles in discomfort, protesting at being still for so long, but he refuses to leave, *forces himself to stay why do you do this to people why do you always hurt them just end it get it over with*, two arms tightening around his waist and it should feel nice, be warm and comforting and grounding but *Ranboo can't feel anything*.

“Will you try and get up today?” Hushes into the back of his neck, tip of a nose pressed into his hairline, and the amount of anguish in his voice, the sadness and the fear and *the pain you put that there you hurt him*, makes Ranboo clamp his eyes shut, desperate to be rid of it, “I-It doesn’t have to be much, okay? Just- sit up, watch a movie with me?”

The silence drags on, distorting and warping at the edges, curling inwards like reality bending around a blackhole, *crushing everything out of existence wish it'd get you so tired don't wanna do this be here can't take one more day one more second*, and a shaky exhale ruffles his hair, faint burn from the tears that roll down onto his skin, “F-Fuck, p-please, Boo, *please*. I love you, I-I want to help you but I...I don't know what *to do*-”

*Let me die*, swirls in his head like curls of sand out in the wastes, tiny, sharp little particles of it that stick to everything, get grit in your eyes under your claws, *forget me move on take that braid out of your hair and just let me go*, painful, cutting edges that you can never get rid of, always find them clinging to something else, *stop loving me whatever you see in me's a sham nothing's ever been here you're deluded*.

“I love you.” There’s tears in his voice tripping it up, trailing down his face, *burn* where they strike Ranboo’s neck, *red hot tip of a thermal knife but this time you lean into it begging them to cut a little higher little deeper end me you cowards you scream at them*, “Q-Queens past, I-I love you so m-much. P-Please be okay, *I love you...st-stay, please Queens pl-please, pr-promise you'll s-stay*-”

*He can't he can't he can't not a promise he can make*, and at his continued refusal to voice anything, a hand carefully grabs at his, is gentle moving around his taped up, busted open knuckles, but Ranboo can feel the way Tubbo’s fingers shake as he laces them together, how he curls his head down behind him, doesn’t bother stifling the quiet sobs that slip free.

Tubbo cries a lot now, is always thumbing at his eyes or dragging palms down his face, rubs his skin raw as he stares after him like he’s seeing a ghost, crawls into bed behind Ranboo and shakes with silent tears, hangs on so tight, it’s almost like he’s convinced that if he doesn’t, Ranboo’s going to vanish.

*He's not wrong you're so close just a few more steps and that's it*, Reshaa croons, sharp tips of her claws carding through his hair, fiddling with the braid that’s almost come completely undone, *have you made any plans? You have to know it's rude to keep us waiting, little brother*.

*Not yet...m'tired*, Ranboo whispers, sinking back into her touch, *I'll get to it later*, and Reshaa gives a sharp tug on his braid, noxious floral of her perfume rising over him like a tide, *don't take too long. I know you're self centered, but try and think about others for once, the burden you are to them. Get it over with*.

*I know I-I know I'm trying...* but Ranboo feels like his body's made of lead, a neutron star in mortal form, the mere thought of getting up so exhausting, he's on the verge of sleep again, clawing towards it viciously so he can finally escape being aware of himself.

He's almost there, pieces and parts dissolving into the black void, spiraling head over tail down through relieving nothingness, forgetting about the bed under him, the arms around him, soft crying at his back and tears of fire burning through his shirt, is unfortunately jolted back to reality by an insistent thudding noise.

Tubbo drags his deadweight closer for a second, static clouding Ranboo's ears so he doesn't hear what he says, rather feels the words pressed into his skin before Tubbo gets up, *love you please stay please hang on love you so much*, but then he's gone, leaving a gaping hole behind Ranboo that he wishes wasn't there. Curling into himself tighter, Ranboo barely catches the quiet swish of something opening and closing, muffled voices, another round of the door letting someone out, and then the bed's dipping at his back again, but less like the weight of someone crawling in, just resting against it.

"Hey, are you any good at making cookies?"

The absurdity of the question combined with who's voice it is enough to move Ranboo to look over his shoulder, squinting in confusion because yeah, that's definitely Dream, arms folded on the mattress where he crouches next to the bunk.

"Well?" Dream asks, round head tipping to the side in question, voice light and airy as he prods, "Are you or not? Because I could really use some help."

*What the hell what the fuck why does he care what's happening go away I don't want to deal with this with you*, and Ranboo shakes his head no, tired and confused and bewildered, just wants Dream to *go*, but the shifter shrugs his shoulders, holds a hand up apologetically, "Sorry, didn't hear you, could you say that again?"

*Fucker know what he wants what game he's playing*, Ranboo hangs his head, lets his hair fall across his face and hides the grimace he makes, arm starting to twinge where it's propping him up, *easier to just give him what he wants and he'll go leave you alone to your void give in no use fighting*, and he clears his throat, hoarsely snapping, "N-No, I- I don't-"

"Great! So we can learn together then, come on." Dream announces *far* too chipperly, and Ranboo jerks his head up, glaring at the hand being held out in his direction. *Go away leave me alone what's the point interacting with a corpse a shell of a thing nothing inside but depthless dark*, lips rolling back baring his fangs, fully intends to flop back over and ignore him because getting up sounds *miserable* but... Dream isn't going to let this go.

Ranboo *knows him*, knows he's not going to leave, *accept defeat*, until he gets what he wants and the longer Ranboo puts that off, the longer he's going to have to deal with people in his room, *in his face in his head in his life*, and he sighs in defeat, swinging around and gives Dream his hand.

The contact cracks through him, zaps down his nerves and tingles in his chest, like someone's just pressed defibrillator pads to his sternum, and it *hurts*, but not as bad as his arm when



Dream hauls him up, the tension pulling his skin tight, putting too much stress on half healed cuts. Ranboo sways once he's on his feet, has to throw a hand out to right himself, black spots swimming in his vision and glares at Dream from under hooded eyelids as the other says, "See? Not too bad! Now come on, cookies don't make themselves."

Stumbling through the disaster that used to call itself their room, Ranboo has to make the conscious effort to move his legs, remind his joints they're supposed to bend and not lock up like they're crippled by rigor mortis, everything aching like he's had the shit kicked out of him. *You did though don't you remember that mission that bar those assholes sharp biting taste of blood in your mouth*, and Ranboo flexes his fingers, knuckles protesting as he clenches them into fists, spits back at the voice viciously, *it wasn't my blood*.

He doesn't grab anything before they leave, *couldn't find it anyway when's the last time he got up when's the last time he looked when's the last time he cared*, shuffles out into the hallway in sleep pants and a long sleeved shirt, feet bare and quiet following after Dream, hair hanging down in a tangled mess.

*Cannot believe you left the room looking like that disgusting disgrace absolute shame to your family your title*, Meleeri snaps, wavering in between him and where Dream is up ahead, and Ranboo rolls his eyes hard, clacks his teeth at her and mocks, *AbsOLUte SHamE to YoUr faMiLY- yeah I fucking know but who the fuck cares I'm dead anyway calm your fucking tits*.

Meleeri's face contorts like he's never seen before, blistering *rage* and seething indignation pulling her usually stoic features into gross caricatures of emotion, entire form wavering sharply as she yells, *the nerve! Never taught you to speak like that never should've taught you to speak at all is it him is it that degenerate that's warped you, no good criminal vile thing absolutely disreputable I-*

"Say that about him again and I rip your throat out with my teeth." Ranboo hisses under his breath, takes a few quick steps and blows right through her, claws flexing out at his sides looking to snag into parts of her dress, tear into *her* skin like he's torn into his own, *like her words have torn him up inside ragged bleeding mess that he can't stop just keeps oozing out around his fingers drip drip drip down his ribs do you want it to stop do you do you do yo-*

"Did you say something?" Dream asks, head cocked to the side, and Ranboo almost laughs, *ha not for you not for anyone no one's there that you can see only for me did you know I see people constantly mind's cracked in two in ten in a thousand never been right should've never lived*, rolls his head back and regards him through a slitted eye, "No."

There is nothing put together about him right now, *mask slipped and broken in a dozen places no control over his face over anything probably looks absolutely insane*, but Dream lets it go, meandering down the hallways of HQ with his hands tucked in his pockets, asks in such an offhanded manner it's clearly very intentional, "What happened to your hands? They okay?"

*Boots scraping against worn floorboards, freezing cold snap of teleportation ripping you out of existence, the fuck are you doing in here they'd laughed, nasty sound of it echoing in the small bar, claws digging in sharply to legs, murder in your head as they lean over the table body under you shuddering violently as you hit them and hit them and hit them*, and Ranboo

flexes his fingers out of habit, joints stiff and knuckles swollen, split open like the line in his lip, "...yeah."

"Rough mission?"

*Far from the hive aren't you drone hand on his shoulder antenna shying away shrinking into himself, incoherent screaming and ice in your veins, duck weave dodge, blood in your mouth on your fists on their faces under your claws, Ranboo dips his head down low, watching the floor pass under bare feet but it shifts into, worn floorboards dirtied with blood black and red and blue more on your broken up knuckles a face smashed into something unrecognizable hands yanking you back roughly, "...sure."*

"...wanna talk about it?"

*You're going to kill them you're going to kill them rip them into a hundred pieces hurt them like he hurts like his people hurt like you hurt maybe it'll stop maybe you'll get rid of it the thing that strangles you from the inside out, dry throat and shaking hands, fingers aching and burning with the need to tear into something and he worries at the medical tape wrapped around his wrists, remember the way he looked at you after never forget the horror the fear the lack of recognition like he doesn't know you-*

"There's nothing to talk about." Ranboo whispers hoarsely, keeps his eyes trained forwards but it won't leave his head, *scared scared he was scared of you it isn't your blood on your face or in your mouth who are you his eyes ask*, can't fight the itching in his hands anymore, runs the razor sharp edge of a claw under the tape and draws a new line open.

This is a new thing, always accidental in the past, *was it was it though knew what you were doing and did it anyway just like every person you've ever hurt*, but now it's intentional, claws seeking out skin because it makes him feel something, because it hurts, because he deserves it, because it's something to do, because he doesn't know why, *because he doesn't know anything anymore.*

They're never deep, *but they could be could go all the way down to arteries and veins could be your way out*, crisscross his arms in lazy patterns that Ranboo drags into existence the few minutes Tubbo will ever leave him alone, stays practically glued to his side any other time, the both of them wasting away at HQ because Ranboo's a lunatic and can't be trusted on his own anymore.

Rascheska was the nail in the coffin, *metaphorical wish it was literal dull thud sentencing you away for eternity finally over finally done finally buried*, the last mission after Bosn-  
~~*screaming incoherently vile words going to kill him it's you/abus è it's you-ABUSER*~~  
~~*IT'S YOU*~~-oir, incident in the bar forcing Techno to ground them both under the guise of 'mental health leave'.

They couldn't fly, couldn't take missions, couldn't leave *sentenced here to die*, and after that, there stopped being a point to getting out of bed.

Ranboo kept laying there in the hopes that it'd drive Tubbo insane, that he'd finally give in, go find another partner, *see how worthless you are pointy nails digging into his face forcing*

*him to meet his hideous eyes nothing worthwhile in you, but he didn't, hasn't hasn't hasn't not yet not yet still could probably will eventually realize will leave you-*

But he hasn't yet, dotes on Ranboo like it matters, like it's going to change anything, somehow, *convince him he's worth something*, but Tubbo's always been prone to ideals and this is no different. Whatever he sees in Ranboo isn't there, *nothing is*, and he wants him to realize that, to move on with his life, forget about Ranboo like everyone else always has.

*What a shame what a shame he's got such a tight grip on you hard to get away isn't it,*  
Reshaa hums sympathetically, and she's been more understanding lately, hovers over Ranboo and tells him she *understands*, knows that he's tired and drained and over everything, just wants what's best for him, *supports him where it matters hand splayed out on his back one shove that's all he needs-*

Her claws curl tighter, silky strands of hair drifting down over his shoulders, brushing against his neck as she leans closer, whispering in his ear, *of course dear brother of course always here for you always going to support you, and a suggestion, if I can? Since you can't get rid of him, maybe...take him over the **side with you-***

Ranboo whirls around, hand lashing forward ready to gouge eyes out, because *NO, never NEVER that how dare she how dare anyone not him anyoNE BUT HIM*, swears he sees a slitted green gaze for an instant, but there's nothing there. It's just an empty hallway, shrieking laughter fading in his ears, replaced with the frenetic drumming of his own heart and shaky furious panting, jerks to look over his shoulder hearing, "Uh...everything okay?"

*No no nothing is never has been cracks so deep nothing can make it like a planet rent in half unsurvivable uninhabitable unworthy*, and Dream sounds concerned, never changing smile on his face, but his posture is stiff, *worried unsettled distressed*. That's the only way people will look at Ranboo anymore, *like they can all see all see how wrong everything is about him drives him mad stop LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT*, and he hunches over, tail twitching behind him angrily, words low and seething, "The fuck do you care for."

Dream doesn't rear back at his tone, can't look startled with that blank face of his, but nothing changes about his posture, *worried sure but overall calm standing there like he's unmovable like when you come screaming at him in the gym*, and Ranboo's shoulders twitch when he says, "I care because I'm your *friend*-"

*-sure sure talk about me behind my back don't you only looking for what I can do for you  
jokes on you I'm not good for anything anymore-*

“-I *worry* about you-”

*-liar liar liar liar no you don't no one does how could you how could anyone miserable  
worthless pathetic thing nothing here-*

“-because I know you’re struggling and I want you to get better.”

Better? Better! ~~BETTER~~ -don't make him laugh, there is no *better*, he's been trying to get better for months now and it's not working, Ranboo's either the same or worse than when he

got here, worse worse worse almost struck ~~him~~ almost hit ~~him~~ never did that before who's to say it won't get worse how much longer how much longer until it's Tubbo under you and you're beating him unrecognizable-

Nervous laughter stutters out of his mouth, and Ranboo trips back, hadn't thought about *that* but now it's all he can see, *worn blood smattered floorboards deep red splashed everywhere staining his knuckles coating his mouth foul and metallic impish facial features smashed to pieces wide terrified eyes staring up at him betrayed and scared and hurt you hurt him you hurt him what have you done what did you do* **WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU**

"Hey hey hey, Ranboo- *Ranboo*. You're okay, it's okay, just breathe, okay? In one two, out one two, can you do that for me?" *He can't he can't he can't*, electricity crackles through him, zinging under his skin and the jolt knocks- *nightmare and terror and worst thing you did this abuse* -out of his head, but Ranboo tears himself from Dream's hold, stammering, "S-Stop! D-Don't- y-y-you can't- I-I-I'll h-hurt you too-!"

"No, you won't-

"*You don't know that!*" Ranboo shrieks, claws digging in harshly to his head, yanking and pulling at his hair, doesn't know what else he can *do* to get them to see, *how wrong how broken everything about him is sharps edges cutting into everyone around him get away get away get away FROM HIM*, "Y-You have no i-idea **NO IDEA** h-how many- h-h-how many p-people there've b-been-!"

"Probably not as many as I've killed." Dream says it so easily, not uncaring, but like it's a wound that's long since closed up, scared over, memory of pain lurking under his words and nothing else, voice growing quieter and yet clearer as he draws closer, "Life is shit sometimes, like- so *actually completely fucked up*, but that doesn't make us bad people-

"STOP IT-! I'm n-not *innocent*, I-I'm nothing like you...I-I did this to *m-myself*-" Ranboo stresses, points where his claws are dug in like blazing embers, but they start to unlatch, life seeming to draw away from his limbs, leaving him very aware of how exhausted he is. Existence weighs on him like nothing else ever has, and he really wants to collapse to the floor, hopes he falls straight through it and keeps going, "I just...t-there's no one to blame but *me- I had a choice.*"

Ranboo can see Dream at the corner of his vision, hovering just in front of him, but it's still a surprise as dry hands wrap around his own, pull them gently from his head, feels like someone punches him in the gut when Dream hushes, "But you didn't have a choice, not really. We don't get to choose how others treat us, this was *done to you*...it wasn't your fault."

*Wrong didn't have to let it get to you could've been better stronger should've known all along this isn't how to behave this isn't right*, and Ranboo shakes his head frantically, throat constricting tight like there's a pair of hands wrapped around it, choking him out, but Dream won't let up, "None of that should've ever happened to you, you didn't deserve it, do you hear me? There is *nothing* you could've ever done to deserve being treated like that."

*Ha yes there is, he doesn't know the half of it,* Reshaa cackles, arms draped casually over Ranboo's shoulders, her head tipping to rest against his as she flicks a hand, counting things down on her fingers, *the servants you've had executed, what you did to the Maanhe family, all the lies you've told just to get what you want, everyone you've hurt for fun...do you ever think little brother, do you ever think if maybe you've driven someone over the edge? Something you said that made them jump?*

*Knife under the ribs in his throat punched clean out through his trachea,* and Ranboo tries to swallow past it, *can't,* and chokes on anything he could think to say, is left numb and mute and *terrified* staring at Dream's simple face, just wishing he'd leave him alone *that everyone would leave him alone he doesn't deserve any of this he doesn't want to feel this he doesn't want to feel anything,* but ever the bastard, Dream won't go, drops his hands with a sigh.

"Alright...come on. Cookie time." Dream says, wrapping an arm around Ranboo's shoulders, displacing Reshaa who goes with a snooty huff, more or less uses his grip to guide him down the hallway, but not in a controlling way, something kinder, *like he's helping him find his footing.* It's only slightly awkward at first, Ranboo's taller than Dream, but for a second it feels nice, like he's small and tucked away out of sight, ghost of a memory whispering through him, *cuddled into her side everything's okay nothing can get you you're safe now,* and ever so gently, he leans the barest amount into the contact.

The kitchens are a seldom used, desolate space, too small to service the Syndicate as it is now, also outmoded with the addition of food replicators, so they're absolutely deserted when they walk in and Dream flicks the lights on. He makes some offhanded comments about being lucky they have the place to themselves, but Ranboo can see layers of dust on the counters and knows it wasn't a coincidence.

Dream *knew* no one else would be in here, brought Ranboo here *specifically* because of that, and he doesn't know how to feel about it, picks at the cuffs of his shirt, sleeves long enough to cover everything up to his wrists but not the ugly mess the rest of his hands are, kinda wishes they were, is so tired of looking at medical tape stained black in spots.

There's a smaller replicator in here, and Dream fiddles around with it for a few minutes, humming under his breath as Ranboo slumps against some cabinets, staring off into space while it feels like his brain melts out of his ears. Eventually though, Dream's got an array of supplies laid out in front of him, has to needle Ranboo into moving but he does, drifting over as Dream claps his hands together excitedly, "Alright! Let's get started...you might wanna roll your sleeves back before we start, don't want them to get dirty."

Ranboo had shuffled over with enough prompting, but freezes now, nothing subtle about it at all as he refuses to lift his head, hands stilled over where they were going to grab a bowl of white looking powder, eyes locked on the end of his shirt sleeve, but *nothing is visible he made sure of it knows how to wrap the tape so it lies flat wears dark colors so the blood won't show through he knows how to do this but then hOW DOES HE KNOW-*

His hands start to shake, fingers curling to self-consciously pull the fabric down a little more, doesn't want Dream to see because he's *ashamed embarrassed angry scared,* but it doesn't matter what he's done, it *shouldn't matter,* no one should care *and they don't.* Forcing his

limbs back into motion, Ranboo drags the bowl closer, shaking its contents around and doesn't look up as he murmurs, "I-I'm fine."

*Lie you haven't been fine in weeks haven't said you loved me in weeks*, a tired, tear strained voice whispers and Ranboo winces, glad at least his hair shrouds his expressions from where Dream stands on his right, some tension bleeding out of him at Dream's easy going voice, "Yeah, okay, whatever you want. I'm taking off my jacket though."

"Alright..." Ranboo mumbles confused, not sure why that's pertinent information, fingers wrapped tight around the slick sides of the glass bowl, hears the sound of rustling as Dream presumably shrugs his bomber off.

"Okay! So, George gave me a rundown earlier, but I've never done this before so bear with me." Dream laughs warmly, reaching over to grab a dish of another white, crumbly thing in front of Ranboo, rambling on about something else, but Ranboo doesn't hear it, whips his head to stare after the twisted, wrinkled skin of Dream's forearm.

Some of it shines strangely in the lights overhead, sections so gnarled back in on itself it looks like tree bark, spreads from the backs of his hands up over his elbows, disappearing under the sleeve of his t-shirt. *Burns they're burns*, his brain supplies dazedly, can't look away as Dream adds all the little dishes of powder to the bigger bowl, *how long have they been there what happened when did it happen did he did someone else*, and now that he's thinking about it, Ranboo can't remember a single instance of seeing Dream in a short sleeved anything.

Every memory he has, Dream's either in his baggy bomber or green hoodie, loose fitting athletic shirts with sleeves he can hook a thumb through, pulling them down even further, hiding this- *entire absolute mess must have been agony*, and Ranboo's own arms burn faintly in phantom pains.

"I don't only wear long sleeves because I'm ashamed or anything." Dream begins conversationally, head tipped down to where he's working on stirring all the dry ingredients together, posture relaxed, "It's kinda habit at this point, I don't have a lot of feeling in my skin anymore so it's easier to see if I've been injured when my clothing's torn."

"What happened?" Ranboo whispers horrified, *how practical how morbid*, fingers flitting up without much conscious thought, touching shakily at the medical tape he's been hiding from view, covering up all the thin slits in his skin, and Dream shrugs, reaching for a carton of something, "That's how they would discipline us back where I used to be, get metal rods real hot and just-"

He pantomimes rapping something down on the inside of his forearm, hand then dropping to trace some of the ridges it left behind, "It was less likely to get infected that way, plus it just fucking hurt. That was always a huge selling point for them oh-! Could you pass me that mixey thing?"

Ranboo hands over what he's pointing at in a haze, can't stop staring can't stop thinking about his own *back there- dim lights and cracked concrete stained dark where they hastily mop up his blood, frigid burn of it sliding down his face dripping into his eyes, searing heat*

at his neck fingers digging into his shoulder harsh keeping him in place scared song bird-croaks out desperately, “I-I’m s-so sorry, *f-fuck, Dream- I-I’m- Ancients*, I-I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s okay, thank you for sympathizing with me.” Dream says softly, head turning to face him while he mixes the absolute shit out of something light yellow, and in this form, he’s always smiling, but Ranboo can hear the real one in his voice as he continues, “There’s not much else you *can* say, but it means a lot, knowing you’re there for me, Ranboo.”

“B-But-” Ranboo tries, knows his words fall flat in the face this kind of monstrosity, are weak and hollow and *do nothing*, but clamps his mouth shut as Dream reaches over and places a hand over one of his, “I know it doesn’t seem like much, but you’re worried about me, *upset* on my behalf...you *care* about me. And that’s more than enough, really, it is.”

It goes quiet while they move through the rest of the steps, Dream passing off the big bowl of dry ingredients to Ranboo, tells him to mix in a cup at a time to the bowl he’s working on, doesn’t say anything when as Ranboo’s reaching over, his sleeve rucks back, pearly white bandages standing out starkly against his skin, doesn’t say anything either when he yanks it back down.

*Could make fun of you and doesn’t could mock how easily you gave in but isn’t could press the issue but won’t*, Ranboo thinks, mind turning end over end and back around, so very lost and tired, not sure what he’s doing here, watching Dream whip some confection together with his scarred hands, Ranboo’s own braced on the countertops and making his abused skin pull.

*Don’t you remember anything I taught you only supposed to need yourself*, whispers through his mind, muffled sound of a riding crop striking a hard surface, but it fades away like quieting winds of a slackening storm, words drifting over him like slowing sand particles and not cutting deep like they can, *only rely on yourself can’t trust anyone...have to be...alone...can’t...rely...on...*

And maybe it’s pathetic and needy of him, but Ranboo kinda wants someone to take his hands in theirs, wrap his claws away and look him in the eyes and tell him to stop, to tell him that they’re worried about him, that they care, that they *sympathize*, *that they understand that they’re sorry*, and he looks up hesitantly at where Dream’s dragging a spoon through their dough.

“I’m embarrassed.” Ranboo whispers, fingers flexing against the countertops, makes a conscious effort to keep them there and away from his arms, newest cut stinging sharp against his left wrist, “O-Or ashamed maybe...I-I don’t know I...I just- I know I’m not s-supposed to *be doing this*. ”

“It would be better if you weren’t.” Dream allows slowly, clear he’s trying to pick his words carefully, hands stilled in their mixing, long fingers tapping around the handle of the spoon, “Do you know why you’re doing it?”

“Control.” Ranboo says automatically, because that’s what it used to be, a way to snap his head back from wherever it’d gone, the pain forcing him to refocus and get everything back together otherwise it wouldn’t stop, but it changed, somewhere along the lines *it changed*.

“So whenever you feel a lack of control, you hurt yourself?” And hearing it in such plain terms makes Ranboo’s heart squeeze painfully, automatic defenses jumping to mind demanding to be let out, *I don’t mean it I don’t mean it an accident not intentional didn’t know how sharp*, but they’re all *lies*, he *does mean it*, it’s *not an accident*, it is *intentional*, knows *exactly how sharp*, how *much pressure to use to break skin*.

Shrugging a little helplessly, Ranboo stares at his claws and feels bile taint his mouth knowing what they’ve done, what they *could do*, is in parts shamed that he’s done this, disgusted that he hasn’t finished it, angry over everything and *hopelessly lost and just Ancients why is it always like this why can’t he just be normal*, wets his lips and stammers, “I-I...I think I...I-I’ve been um, b-been hu-hur- *uh*, b-because I feel like I *have to*...I-like if I don’t do i-it to *myself*, I-I’ll...I-I-I’ll do it to um, t-to someone else.”

And for once, it feels like the truth, terrifying and fragile and very dangerous falling out of his mouth, could shatter apart so easily, *could shatter him apart so very easily*, but gentle hands catch it, cradle it carefully and don’t try to pry for more, “I’m so sorry you have to live with this fear, and I understand how much it hurts...I used to feel like that a lot too.”

Ranboo looks over at where Dream’s fiddling around with the oven, poking at buttons while he tries to get the thing turned on, but he stops when he feels eyes on him, tips his head to the side even though he doesn’t have actual eyes right now, makes sure he’s meeting Ranboo’s anyway, “I could tell you a million times you’re not going to hurt anyone, but I know it doesn’t help, at least...it didn’t for me.”

*Can’t believe him won’t believe them deluded you’ve tricked them convinced them you’re worth something anything manipulator manipulator* everything in his mind wails all the time, like a steady wind that blows and blows and blows, never seems to run out of the power that drives it, and Ranboo hangs his head, defeated set to his shoulders as he mutters, “I...I just feel like you’re *lying* to me.”

“I know, and I promise I’m not. I’m really, *really* not Ranboo, but I don’t know if saying that *helps*...do you know if it would help if I said it more? Or would you rather me express sentiment another way?” Dream asks like these are easy questions to answer, and not basically the hardest fucking things Ranboo’s ever been asked.

He doesn’t *want* Dream to express sentiment, to lie to him, *but he does he does so much because he’s not lying he’s not lying he’s not-* but he *is*, trying to manipulate him trying to hurt him, *he’s not he’s not he’s genuine*, caring about him when he *shouldn’t*, *what’ve you ever done for him absolutely nothing only bother him with your shit worthless*, and Ranboo snarls a hand into his hair, yanking on it harshly, just wishes things would make sense.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay if you don’t know, you don’t need to beat yourself up over not having an answer.” Dream hushes, and Ranboo rolls his eyes hard because that’s supposed to be what he’s good for, *knowing things and having answers*, but he’s useless like this, doesn’t *serve a purpose*. He’s just a giant, jumbled mishmash of a person that keeps trying to self-implode but people won’t let him, and he’s kinda waiting for the day either he gets lucky, or more realistically, they get tired of stopping him.



*Soon soon soon hopefully soon*, the skeletons jitter from behind their unchained doors, peaking out of cracks to grin at him with macabre smiles, *it's been going on for so long you think you're tired think how tired they all are soon soon soon they'll stop caring stop watching stop listening just let you go like smoke escaping out of hands and lost to the night-*

“Could you help me form the cookies? Oven should be ready soon and I need an extra set of hands.” Dream’s lilting words cut through the echoing voices, *needs your help you can do that be of use wants you here for some reason just like can't do this without you stay with me Boo please stay*, and Ranboo’s hands slip limply out of his hair, hang uselessly at his sides until Dream takes one in his and gently eases it into the light brown dough.

Its sticky and faintly warm under Ranboo’s finger pads, and he presses them experimentally into the substance, brief flicker of interest at the feeling of it moving up in between his fingers, watches as Dream scoops up a little handful of it and rolls it in his palms, triumphantly holding a lumpy ball out towards Ranboo.

Between the two of them, they get all the cookies rolled out fairly quickly, and Dream let's Ranboo space them out on the cookie sheet, shaky grid overlaying the entire tray showing him exactly how far apart to place each one so it’s even. It blinks in and out of reality, brain struggling to maintain it, but it’s nice, makes him feel more like himself, makes him feel useful even if it’s just setting treats onto a metal tray.

“Would you be willing to try something with me?” Dream asks as Ranboo’s finishing the second to last row, flicks Dream a glance and shrugs his shoulders, not sure unless he gets more information, and Dream hums like he understands, “It’s nothing bad, just some coping techniques I think might help you.”

“Coping techniques?” Ranboo murmurs back, setting the last cookie ball in place and then doesn’t know what to do with his hands, presses his fingertips together to cement them with the glue like leftover dough, pulls them back apart with a satisfying little tugging sensation.

Dream takes the finished cookie sheet and slides it into the oven, leaning against the door of it while he cleans his hands off on a spare towel, “Yeah, we can start with a couple and if they help, great! And if they don’t, that’s okay too, we’ll figure it out...does that sound like something you’d want to try?”

Rolling the greasy dough paste between his fingers, Ranboo doesn’t know what he wants, accepts the towel Dream holds out for him and wipes his hands down, stares at how nasty the medical tape around his knuckles has gotten, covered in cookie dough and old blood like it is.

He’s been so exhausted for weeks now, hasn’t had much interest in anything, but the flicker of something stirs to life in his chest. Ranboo clenches his fingers, winces when it pulls at his knuckles and he’s so tired of everything, but is extra tired of seeing *this, taped up bloody knuckles bandages covering his arms like a corpse smell of blood and antiseptic*, looks up and asks, “What would I have to do?”

Dream walks him through two things, first one being something he calls ‘*taking inventory*’, a thing he does when he’s having trouble reorienting after a panic attack or nightmare, basically works his way out from himself asserting what’s real and what’s not.

“So I start with myself, check to make sure I don’t have the shackles or the collar.” Dream explains, using some ancient looking oven mitts to pull the sheet out of the oven, entire kitchen enveloped with the smell of sugar and butter, “But then I move out from there just like- cataloging what I see? Like in here it’d be, cabinets, oven, cookies, fridge, replicator... things like that.”

“And it works?” Ranboo asks skeptical, eyeing the still hot cookies and arguing with his brain that *no*, they can’t have one right now he’ll burn the shit out of his mouth, *but they smell so good just a bite we’ll be careful*, and Dream shrugs, tossing the mitt on the counter, “It does for me, everyone’s different though. It just...helps me feel more in control of the situation, over *myself*, so I thought it might help you.”

The second technique is harder to listen to, makes Ranboo squirm and dart his eyes away from the black marker Dream holds out to him, fingers all snarled up together and aching for his arms hearing things like *self-harm* and *cutting* and *intentionally hurting yourself*, but his arms ache from his fingers and *Ranboo’s tired of it*, unlatches a trembling hand to take the marker into his own.

“Try and draw things instead, whatever you like, and if it’s really a pain thing, you can get an elastic and snap it against your wrist.” Dream pantomimes the gesture against the gnarled skin on his own wrist, otherwise doesn’t pressure Ranboo for anything else as he’s splitting up the cookies into bandanas, “But ideally, you wanna try and move away from that, but it’s like stepping stones, okay? One step at a time.”

*One step at a time*, Ranboo thinks, following along at Dream’s side back to his room, marker tucked behind an ear, hot bundle of cookies cradled in his hands, *one at a time one foot in front of the other*, fingers worrying at the messy knot he made in the top, intentionally makes them go from picking threads free to fiddling with it gently, just letting the fabric slip between his fingertips, *small steps but steps you can do that you know how to walk*.

Dream parts with him at his door, bomber slung over a shoulder as he waves bye, and shakily, Ranboo goes to copy the gesture, takes a second to breathe before going to grab his ID, only realizing then he quite literally only has the clothes on his back and a sack of cookies, raps as gently as he can on the door without upsetting his knuckles too much.

When there’s no response, he shifts back and forth on his feet, worried he’s going to have to knock harder so Tubbo will hear, realizes he doesn’t know where Tubbo *even is*, fist already part of the way down and wavering with indecision right as the door swishes open. Ranboo blinks, maybe for the first time in a long time really registering how Tubbo looks, how exhausted he is, dark circles under his eyes, the skin around them puffy and irritated, hair an absolute rat’s nest, disheveled braid sticking out weird.

He looks like he hasn’t slept once at all in these few weeks Ranboo’s done nothing *but* sleep.

“H-Hey-” Ranboo stammers, self consciously ducking his head, feeling guilt swamp through him because *he did this made him worry made him lose sleep*, has the sick curling thought of dragging open new cuts in punishment, *one’s that’ll really hurt this time*, but he sucks in a trembling inhale, lets it out and imagines that thought going along with it.

*Not doing that I'm holding the cookies can't let them go to get at my arms I'd drop them on the floor then Dream worked hard on these so I'm not doing that,* holds the bandana out to Tubbo in both hands, looks up through his hair and offers soft and unsure, "I-I made cookies-?"

The end of his sentence gets cut off in a weird, high pitched wheeze, punched out of him with how hard Tubbo hugs him, arms encircling him like a vice, wings flared open behind him as he buries his head under Ranboo's chin, thoroughly smashing the cookies. He's mumbling something from where his face is pressed into Ranboo's collarbones, too low and indistinct for most people, but Ranboo leans down, ears flicking as he finally picks up, "*-love you love you love you love you-*"

Keening in the back of his throat, Ranboo wiggles closer, rubbing his cheek into the top of Tubbo's head, works his arms free even though it hurts and snakes them around Tubbo, one hand coming up to cup the back of his head as he hoarsely whispers, "S-Sorry, so *sorry*- I-love you t-too, heulwen, I-I'm *so sorry*-"

"*Fuck! I-It's okay, Boo, s-stelledore, Queens fuck-* I-love you, love you so much, don't e-ever forget that o-okay?" Tubbo hiccups, tears burning where they leak through Ranboo's shirt, and it stings, but it's completely overshadowed by how *warm* he feels right now, *feeling* bleeding back into him where Tubbo's touching, like his entire body's been asleep and is only now just waking up.

They eventually shuffle back into their room, Tubbo with two arms still looped around Ranboo's waist, fire bright fingers splayed out over his side, and Ranboo's realizing a lot of things, stepping into their dorm with clear eyes. It's like he's coming out of a nightmare, a fever dream, seeing everything for how it really is, how trashed their room is, dirty clothes and takeout containers piled up, neither bed made, how disgusting he feels, hair hanging limp and tangled in his face, worryingly can't remember the last time he showered was.

Tubbo look surprised and then heartachingly relieved when Ranboo says he's going to go get cleaned up, follows along after him to the showers, probably because he could use one as well, but mostly because he won't leave Ranboo alone, and...that's for the best, Ranboo needs that right now.

He's still trying to decide if that's okay or not while scrubbing the grime out of his hair in the sonic shower, mind darting back and forth in between, *don't deserve it didn't want to stay don't make him hold on*, and, *the look on his face when you walked up feeling of him in your arms Ancients how could you forget how did you ever forget him*. Fingers fiddling around with the almost completely undone braid, the one he hasn't bothered asking Tubbo to touch for weeks now, Ranboo slowly works his mother's bead free and untangles it, makes sure it gets cleaned as well.

After hair comes hands, and it's easier undoing the nasty medical tape around his knuckles, check the wounds to make sure they're healing okay and dab antibiotic ointment over them, but it's another thing entirely undoing the ones on his arms. The bandages span from his wrists up to his elbows, and Ranboo doesn't want to *do this*, but he can't remember how he's been taking care of them, *if he has*, and it's so unsettling to not *know things*, that it prompts him to do it, unwinding the tape to reveal the whole, ugly mess.

Razor thin lines crisscross his forearms in a jumble, a lot of them inflamed and flushed dark purple black around the edges, all of it in desperate need of antibiotic ointment and a chance to breathe, and the first task is easy, super simple, doable, but not the second, *fear and worry and panic and judgment and people will see they'll know what you do how broken you are resorted to this because your head's so wrong-*

Running careful fingertips down his arms, Ranboo hates the way it feels, skin all raised and bumpy and *gnarled*, recoils at the sensation, panic flaring in his chest because what if it doesn't go back down, he did way more and way worse than he ever has before, *what if it's always like this*, but then a light voice curls through the anxiety, *I'm not ashamed or anything-*

And he remembers Dream with his horrible scars and the easy smile in his voice, arm around his shoulders dragging him in making him feel safe, no judgment and one step at a time and Ranboo takes a deep breath, lets it out, and it shakes, but that's okay, *he's going to be okay*. Slipping his clean shirt on, Ranboo tugs the sleeves down out of habit before leaving the shower stall, throwing away the wadded-up ball of medical tape on his way out, meets Tubbo in the main part of the bathroom.

He's fiddling with his handheld, probably messaging his old friend from the Academy, *Tommy Innit recently twenty lieutenant in the Imperial Sunfleet loudest person you've ever heard*, but pockets it as soon as Ranboo walks up, smiles at him a bit hesitantly, unsure, shape of it broadening into something more real when Ranboo offers him a timid smile of his own.

It's on the way back to their room that Ranboo knows what he needs to do, crosses the threshold with trepidation and anxiety burning in his gut, *but he knows what he needs to do*. He's got to roll his sleeves up, he needs to let the cuts breathe, he has to tell Tubbo what he's been doing if he hasn't already figured it out for himself.

And doing that is a bit like unwinding medical tape, scary and terrifying to reveal *everything*, but...nothing'll heal right if he doesn't, and Ranboo has to start somewhere, gets Tubbo's attention with a quiet, "H-Hey, I um- I-I need to a-ask for a uh, a favor?"

"Of course, Boo, anything you need." Tubbo says, setting his caddy of shower supplies down and immediately comes back to stand in front of him, and it's a lot, having him *right there*, but Ranboo drops his eyes, fingers latched desperately on the cuff of his shirt, *you can do this you can do this one step at a time Dream wasn't scared and you shouldn't be either*, slowly works the fabric back, "I-I-I need um, I- uh, I-I need y-you to um, k-keep an eye o-on m-me."

There's no sharp intake of breath, no gasp of surprise, *of horror*, no screaming no crying no *laughing*, just too warm fingers hesitantly spreading out over his skin, stopping just at the edge of where the abuse begins, touch gentle and loving as they caress the insides of his wrist, summer soft voice murmuring, "O-Of course, stelle, I- I got your back, o-okay? Y-You're not alone, r-remember? Remember what I promised you?"

*Sitting on the edge of the Eshachi's ramp, quick fast panicked packed bag sitting behind you wondering where he is if you made the right choice terrified it's too late but then too many things in your chest seeing how he runs to you disbelief and joy on his face*, hears the words

in his mind but wants something more real to hang on to, wets his lips and pleads, “I-I do, b-but tell me a-again?”

“I’m *never* leaving you, you don’t have to be alone ever again.” Tubbo says, and it’s not word for word the same, but the feeling that soaks through is, tender and honest and adoring, gets Ranboo to lift his head to make eye contact, left speechless at the fierce light in Tubbo’s eyes, reminds him of seeing solar flares snap and curl off stars, raw power and absolute beauty in a single entity.

“Thank you.” Ranboo whispers, shifting his hand to actually hold Tubbo’s own, tail wagging gently feeling the way their fingers slot together, like Ranboo’s found some piece he didn’t know he’s been missing, and Tubbo looks up at him, love so very painfully obvious in every line of his face as he smiles, “Anything, anytime, Ranboo, I *mean it*. Whatever you need, just ask.”

It’s very obvious all of a sudden, how bereft he feels without his braid, and it’s probably a placebo effect, it really doesn’t weigh much nor is it super intrusive, but it’s strange, having all of his hair unbound. *Just ask just ask just ask he’s your husband just ask don’t deserve him shouldn’t want me but he does he stayed he cares about you he loves you just ask*, and taking his unoccupied hand, Ranboo fishes the cariad bead out of his pocket.

There’s some part of his mind needling at him that he isn’t worthy to be called Tubbo’s husband, should just leave the braid out not bring it up again *let him forget*, but there’s a hand in his and starlight eyes looking at him *because they love him*, and no one else, him, *Ranboo*, with his busted head and torn up arms, and he rolls the bead around between his fingers before holding it out for Tubbo, “W-Would you mind re-braiding my hair?”

Tubbo blinks and then smiles, one hand coming up to gently take the bead, another reaching out to adoringly brush hair behind his ear, eyes crinkling at the corners when Ranboo shivers, chasing after his touch like he *hasn’t felt it in years*, “Not at all, c’mere, come sit with me, stelle.”

And as Ranboo’s sitting on the floor with Tubbo behind him, combing mhyyr oil through his hair before doing his braid, gets caught up and loses whole sections of time where Tubbo’s just scratching along his scalp, when Ranboo’s sitting behind him devotedly doing the same, he feels like he’s finally woken up from a long, arduous nightmare, curls around Tubbo and tucks their heads together, doesn’t ever want to go back.

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#### **Lesson Fourteen: If you have the opportunity to gain a favor take it**

Voidfall is a bustling metropolis all on it’s own, but unlike most other cities, it doesn’t turn on currency, *it turns on information*, secrets whispered in dark corners and behind flicking fans, passed back and forth like stock brokers making a deal of a lifetime. It was one of the first things Meleeri taught him, drilling it into his head to keep his secrets close upon pain of death, but hoarding everyone else’s closer, *that he should kill to get them*.

“I don’t wanna hurt anyone.” Ranboo whispered horrified, flinched when Meleeri cracked her crop into the desk at his backtalk and slurred words, raising above him like the towering black clouds of a sandstorm, “What you want is trivial. You are not just yourself, you represent your entire family, *the royal line*, and I will be damned before I ever see that disgraced.”

Ranboo knew better than to argue with her, *sit down be quiet know your place*, curled into himself and nodded his head, pulse stuttering fast and wild at the cold brush of leather under his chin, forcing his head up, “You are the last of eight, your highness. Nothing in your life is going to be easy, so I won’t be either, but I will show you how to survive.”

He’s tasked with finding information on his classmates, comes back crying the first few times because of how bad he feels, digging through their things and using his title to scare them, but Meleeri thunders at him until he stops, until he shuts it all away and builds a big wall to shield himself, cowers behind it while she carries on.

*Not real not real not real it’s a bad dream wake up bad dream wake up*, but he never does and it gets easier as he gets older, walls and doors growing and towering and sealing things away easily, makes it simple to turn his wicked fast mind on the people around him, always adored solving puzzles but *now he adores taking them apart*.

Nobles he has to be careful with, they have minds of their own but the servants don’t, are easily swayed, and Ranboo keeps a wary eye on them, learns who belongs to who as he passes them every day, all offering him the same nod but they never meet his eyes, *don’t have to no one respects him*, and his lips want to curl.

They’re always scheming for someone, like little mice scurrying in the walls, and he’s been working on keeping them out of his business, but it feels like every time he turns around after plugging up a hole, he finds another one nibbling on something else. It’s exhausting, keeps Ranboo up late into the nights, trying to collect information and favors as fast as he can but he’s the youngest, there’s not much left for him, and what he manages to scrape together is paltry in comparison.

All he has is a handful of the lowest level of servants, ones who would probably turn on him with a single look from any of his elder siblings, *if they cared enough to steal his rodents*, weak stack of favors that grants him little besides after hours access to the library and perhaps an extra treat from the kitchens.

When Reshaa is named Heiress, the last of her restrictions drop away and everything in the royal wing clams up like shulkers in their shells, and Ranboo knows his eldest sister does not favor him, knows he’s not going to last long with the flimsy connections he has. Ranboo’s *got* to do better, has to find a way to outsmart them all, work with the shit hand he was dealt, starts spending his sleepless nights teleporting into places he shouldn’t be and learning things no one wants him to know, finally has things he can leverage with the court.

Courtiers start to mind what they say around him but Ranboo finds out anyway, can think faster than they can, sees underneath the underneath like he was born to do it, steadily builds up enough of a barricade in between him and his siblings.

It's not as impressive a net as Reshaa's, as Taysen's, as Ettroo's, as *any of them*, but it's *Ranboo's* and he controls it beautifully, rips the world out from under the feet of anyone who *dares* breath a word against him, garners something of a reputation for being able to pick people apart like the loose, crumbling black sandstone of the wastes.

*Just like his lady mother*, Ranboo catches servants whispering and they stare at him in fear as he yells, shrink back at his righteous indignation because *how dare anyone besmirch her name*, she wasn't like the rest of *them*, she was above it, she was good and kind and *caring* and he makes sure neither one of them *ever* sees the light of day again.

He learns how to play this game, how to do this dance, watches for daggers in the gloom and cobras slipped into his bed, sends boxes of scorpions in retaliation to one of his brothers, spikes his third sister's tea with laxatives during a courtship meeting, each year the retributions between them all escalating.

Servants are dismissed, some are executed, courtiers get flung down through the social ladder rungs, a brother breaks his nose, a sister's affair is exposed, Ranboo has his incident on the roof, all casualties in a never-ending game of tit for tat he and his siblings play, each of them vying for a better position at court, more favor *more time with father*, all trying to shove the others under Reshaa's radar and valiantly trying to keep themselves off it.

But no matter what he does, how many people he drags down with him, Ranboo never feels safe.

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Someone accidentally knocks into the back of his chair and all of Ranboo's hair stands up on end- *assassin mugger kidnapper e n e m y clear spot over there at negative thirty five point eight seven six two and one hundred seventy three point nine four one jump possible blaster on hip can get shot off in point twenty seconds dead before they hit the ground* -but he forces himself to relax, eyes still doing a quick, nervous sweep of the bustling café.

It's perfectly fine, nothing out of the ordinary, but a few other customers meet his gaze and anxious energy rolls through him, *what are they whispering about what do they know eyes on you stop looking at me can they see can they see what's wrong with you*, has his fingers starting to pick at the skin on his wrist. Realizing what he's doing, *what he has half a mind to do to get this squirming feeling out of him you know you want to*, Ranboo reaches up and pulls the black marker from its customary spot tucked behind his ear, flicks the lid off and starts drawing.

The tip of the marker is soft, glides effortlessly over his skin, doesn't *drag and pinch and cut and rip* like he wants, but he's making himself be okay with it, focuses instead on drawing the most complicated diagrams he can think of. Ranboo tips his head to the side, trying to find a better angle on sketching out this section of the Eshachi's main engine, clucks his tongue and wonders if he should get some thinner tipped markers, just for doing fine lines.

He's really absorbed in his work, everything that's not his sketch pushed out quite nicely on its ass, only thing he has room to think about are the blueprints on the inner workings of the main engine. Ranboo imagines rotating it like it's a 3D model, pinching and zooming in on

certain areas, tries to find a good stopping point because his ear flicks hearing familiar footsteps coming his way.

“One acidic as shit yobun latte and a- oh...*OH!* Shit man! That looks awesome!” Tubbo crows excitedly, quiet thunks as he sets their drinks and lunch down, but Ranboo doesn’t look up, needs all of his concentration for the delicate wiring around the combustion chambers, lips twitching up though when Tubbo hisses, “Oh! *Oh, sorry-* I’ll be quiet...it looks good though! Okay, okay- shutting up now.”

*So sweet so kind love him love him so much cariad my love only one for me*, Ranboo hums happily, marker flowing elegantly across his forearm, taps his foot around under the table until he finds Tubbo’s, moves to hook their ankles together, tail thumping a few times feeling him press back.

Ranboo’s done a few minutes later, relatively pleased with how it looks given the lone marker he has, holds his arm out for Tubbo who eagerly scoots closer to get a better view, half a sandwich stuffed in his mouth as he traces fingers over the dried lines. “Dude...you’re like- *stupid* good at this.” Tubbo praises, looking up at Ranboo with shining eyes and a bright grin, always so easily won over by anything to do with their ship.

“I’m just copying what I see.” Ranboo tells him with a shrug, color rising in his cheeks, better at taking compliments from him, but only just barely, busies himself with his latte and mumbles around the lip of the cup, “It’s not like it’s real talent or anything, just memorization.”

“Bullshit, I could name every part in the Eshachi blindfolded *and* drunk as fuck, but I couldn’t do *this*.” Tubbo tells him, fingers rapping a quick tune against the inside of his arm, and normally, Ranboo doesn’t like people touching him here, knows they can feel the bumpy, ridges of scars that are still healing, but it’s okay if it’s him.

*Different different with you sunshine always been different with you special with you my one and only*, slow drag of warm fingers over meticulously drawn lines, hesitation when they run across a raised scar, quick swipe of a thumb before Ranboo even has a chance to tense, quiet, little unspoken gesture of *its okay not ignoring it know it’s there but it’s okay don’t mind love you anyway love you despite this*.

They haven’t talked much about it, mostly because Ranboo clams up so fast anytime it’s brought up, embarrassed that he regressed that badly. He feels like he needs to have a coherent answer as to why he was doing it, can’t find one for the life of him, but Tubbo never asks for coherency, takes the stuttering, winding roundabout nonsense Ranboo spits at him like it makes sense.

And maybe it does for him, only person Ranboo’s known to deal with him as well as he does, and as Tubbo pulls back, done tracing over all of the lines, *don’t go please*, Ranboo gets a quick flash of an impulsive idea that makes his tail poof. He spins the marker around between his fingers in consideration before holding it out, voice soft as he says, “W-Would you um, w-would you wanna draw something?”



He regrets it instantly because what a stupid thing to say *what a weird question to ask*, about to pull his hand back when Tubbo's eyes go wide, one hand already reaching for the marker, "Wha- you serious? I'd- yeah, that'd be cool but like, only if you're sure?"

"I-I am." Ranboo answers shakily, lets Tubbo take the marker and then wraps that hand around the back of his neck, jerking his head to the side to hide behind his hair, can feel his face bleeding a dark purple. *Stupid thing to ask why would he want who wants to touch your gross scars idiot shouldn't have opened your mouth shouldn't have li-* thoughts grinding to a halt as a warm hand wraps over his wrist gently, holding his arm steady as another gets to work sketching out something in the spot near his elbow, a third coming up to lace their fingers together.

Ranboo hums involuntarily as Tubbo drags a thumb along the side of his palm, loves loves loves the fact that Tubbo has four hands, a kinda weird thing to put a lot of importance on, but he can't help it, adores how both of his hands can be held while another set scratches through his hair or cups his face. He's never said anything because he's pretty sure it edges into the territory of being xenophilic, doesn't ever want to exoticize Tubbo or his people, but it's just *so nice*, one of the many things Ranboo loves about him.

Another thing is how Tubbo's so *warm all the time*, and Ranboo sighs in contentment, entire arm pleasantly hot where he's being touched, hand on the back of his neck unlatching to prop his heavy head up, watches through slitted eyes as Tubbo works. This is nothing as important or intensive as working on the Eshachi, but he's got that little furrow in his brow anyway, tongue poked out to the side, hands gentle and careful, leaching searing heat like sunbaked rocks.

*Ancients*, Ranboo wants nothing more than to curl back up in that feeling, hums a senseless tune that rumbles deep in his chest, mind lazily rerolling the memories from this morning and the morning before, *every morning for a week now actually how is this his life*, where Ranboo's woken up tangled around Tubbo, deliriously overheated and happier than he can ever remember being.

He knows they shared a bed a lot while he was, uh, *not feeling well*, but after he went a few days eating regularly and speaking a little, Ranboo thought that'd be the end of that, that Tubbo would go back to his own bunk, but he never did, still slipped into bed behind Ranboo and wormed around until he was comfortable. Ranboo wasn't about to complain, loved listening to his quiet, even breathes, snuggled close to the heat he radiated with hardly any guilt, only a little worried at first about keeping Tubbo up with his insomnia, but to Ranboo's immense shock, he's started sleeping throughout the night.

It's still a little jarring, finding himself *waking up* every morning and not just the vague realization he needs to get up, but he can't say he minds it, has noticed he's been getting headaches less frequently, relieved to see the dark circles under his eyes clearing up *finally*.

And yeah, he's feeling better physically, but the biggest change is the one he's the most scared to acknowledge, terrified of jinxing it, and Ranboo darts his eyes around the café furtively, calling out, *Meleeri I'm going to stand up and start defaming the entire line if you don't stop me right now*.

But nothing answers him, nothing shows up, *he's alone in his hallway doors silent and behaving themselves no skeletal faces in the gutters*, and his heart rate picks up, hardly daring to believe it could be that simple, that they're finally gone, *that he's free*. It's been like this for a few days now, and thinking back, the last time Ranboo heard from any of them was before he and Tubbo went into that meeting with Techno, but even then, their voices were faint, little more than blurry outlines dancing at the edges of his vision.

At the time, he'd been petrified over that meeting, worried it was finally going to come to light everything that was wrong with him, *that they were going to drag it out of him*, but the specters were gone before he even went in, banished by a warm hand sliding into his. Even without them lurking over his shoulder, Ranboo was still nervous talking to Techno regardless of the buffer Tubbo provided, and yet, he somehow managed to get through it in one piece, convinced Techno he was sound enough to have a blaster again and get them put on the auxiliary roster.

Tubbo had practically skipped out of the crime lord's office, so excited to get out of HQ, he was scrolling through the latest missions on his handheld during the lift ride down, not even fussing that they were relegated to supply runs for a few days. *Think of it like a test run*, Techno said from across his desk, speaking more to Tubbo than Ranboo, but he didn't mind, actually glad for it, *just to make sure uh...everyone's ready to be back out there*.

And everything's been going fine, it's their last day of probation actually, and since Ranboo hasn't lost his mind, Tubbo doesn't have any gaping wounds, and the Eshachi is in excellent shape, as soon as they get home and turn in their report, Techno will bump them back onto the main active-duty list, finally free them from boring crap.

This mission they just finished here on Poincaré was stupid simple, transporting cargo between a few agricultural districts in the area, and usually, this kind of doldrum assignment drove Tubbo up the walls, but he seemed to be enjoying it. He played music too loud in the cockpit, sat with his legs slung over the side of his chair, kicking and batting and pushing at Ranboo's feet, the two of them giggling like children while they tried to force the other back.

They stopped for fuel in the capital after their last drop off, and it was such a nice day that instead of leaving right away, Tubbo suggested they go explore for a little bit, eagerly linked his arms through one of Ranboo's while they strolled down the main boulevard. Railais was a sprawling city and yet, still choked with trees lining its main streets, old and regal in a way that reminded Ranboo a little of Voidfall, but like a reverse image.

Where everything on Annwyl was cold and dark and sharp, all harsh angles and long, narrowed shapes, the buildings here were gentle sloping lines and creamy colors, delicate metal grating on balconies rusted a rich teal, baskets of vegetation spilling out into the streets and curling around gilded insignias. It was a gorgeous place to be, and the two had only planned to do a little sightseeing, but then Tubbo smelled something coming out of a little, stripped awning café and they *had* to make a stop for a late lunch.

Ranboo very carefully goes to pick up his latte, doesn't want to jostle Tubbo while he's drawing, and takes deep sips of the warm, creamy drink, the slight spice in it coating the back of his throat and heating him up from the inside out. This is some of the best yobun he's had in a while, maybe since leaving Voidfall, tastes like a home he's not sure he's ever had, and

Ranboo drinks it contently, watching light shift outside the café's big window, fingers stroking along the hand in his, adores feeling two more move across his skin.

*Remember them in your hair and around your face, fingers hooked behind your ears thumbs dragging slow shapes across your cheeks, when he braids your hair two working on that other two rubbing across your shoulders or resting lightly on your sides so nice so nice to be touched to be loved to be treated gently-*

"Whatchu thinking about? You're all smiley." Tubbo says around a smile of his own, bangs falling into his eyes while he turns back to finishing up his drawing, and not really thinking about it, eyes busy tracing over the looping letters painted on the window, Ranboo mumbles, "M'just love how many hands you have."

*Wait...what...wait- WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT- DID YOU JUST ANCIENTS YOU DID WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU WHO SAYS THAT APOLOGIZE BEG FORGIVENESS APOLOGIZE NOW BY THE ANCIENTS-* his mind screams at him, feels a little like he's mentally getting shaken around by the shoulders, stops though when a surprised laugh busts out of Tubbo, eyes crinkling around a smile as he snaps his head up, "Really?"

"Y-Yeah- b-but I-I'm uh, I'm s-s-so sorry, I-I-I um I didn't mean it like- ya'know not trying to be weird or anything I-I just-" Ranboo stammers, ears flatting to his skull trying to hide how purple they are, can't do jack shit about the color staining his face furiously, kinda wishes the earth would swallow him whole.

*Fuuuuuuuck can't believe you said that xenophile making it weird exoticizing him ugh can't believe you,* but Tubbo waves two hands at him, quickly saying, "No, no! It's okay! Really! It's sweet- I uh, I like how you have a tail."

"You do?" Ranboo asks bewildered and the appendage in question flicks briefly. He has no idea what's so great about it, it usually just gets in the way, easy to grab in fights and gets stepped on all the time, but Tubbo nods his head vigorously, red creeping up his neck, "Y-Yeah! It's really cute how much you emote with it, the little tuft at the top puffs out sometimes and- and I uh- i-it's nice, h-having it um, ya'know like, around my waist?"

His face is completely red by the end of his sentence, and Tubbo drops the maker to bury his head in two hands, antenna bobbing up and down nervously as he mutters, "*Queens what-* I- sorry, I just- *w-why did I say that like-* uuuuugh, *sorry-*"

"Don't apologize." Ranboo rushes out trying to reassure him, worries it came across too demanding and struggles to articulate all the bright, affectionate things curling around in his head, "I-I yeah, I just um, i-it's- it's nice too. *I mean-* um. L-Like I like that y-you like it I-uh, yeah I...yeah."

Ranboo sighs, frustrated with himself and his inability to explain accurately how he's feeling, wishes he was a touch telepath in instances like these, where it's very important to convey confusing things simply. *But maybe you don't have to with him he understands you so well darling,* a gentle voice says and Ranboo's ears perk up, relieved she's still here, worried she left with the rest, and mother laughs sweetly, *never leaving you not really promised you darling promised I'd always be here now talk to him.*

"I like that you like my tail." Ranboo says, starts at the core thought, works his way out from there, attempting to untangle this ball of knotted, glittering sunlight, "It makes me feel... warm... I don't um, don't really *l-like* a lot of things about myself, a-and hearing *you* say you do- I-I- it helps. It helps me feel better. About myself."

Peeking out from the gaps in his fingers, Tubbo slowly starts to lower his hands, face still red but he looks less mortified, voice soft and unsure when he asks, "Really?"

"Y-Yeah...it makes me h-happy, knowing I d-do things that uh- t-that make you feel nice, *like-* appreciated a-and I-loved I guess, *um*, y-yeah- s-sorry I just- *words are hard.*" Ranboo exhales in exasperation, tipping his head back but glances down when he hears a snort, tensions winding out of him as Tubbo drops his hands, "You're telling me. Fuck words."

He holds out a fist, and this is another thing Ranboo's seen Syndicate members do, brings his own up and lightly bumps their fists together, meets Tubbo's shining eyes and reiterates, "Fuck words."

That makes Tubbo laugh, and he pulls his fist back, resting his arms on the table, sheepish look on his face as he says, "But yeah. Um, t-thanks for like, not thinking I'm weird for saying *stupid*, mushy shit like that, I just- I don't know, it just comes out sometimes."

"I *like* your stupid mushy shit." Ranboo tells him earnestly, and he does, he really does, reminds him of all the grand sweeping declarations of love in his romance books, but Tubbo rolls his eyes, smirk pulling his lips up, "Oh? Want me to *woo* you or something Boo boy?"

Oh what a stupid thing to say, *what an absolutely horrible wonderful stupid thing to say*, because now Ranboo can't stop imagining Tubbo saying some of those lines he holds so near and dear, professing his undying love under a field of stars, ducks his head and mumbles, "You don't have to."

"I'm not sure I know how, don't really know much about Ender culture if I'm being honest." Tubbo says with an easy laugh, and Ranboo shrugs, runs the edge of a claw around the lip of his cup, "It's not that different from Nirox honestly, few quirks here and there, but I grew up in the palace so things were...different."

Things are a little quiet after that, just the hustle and bustle of the café around them, soft, syrupy language of the locals flowing easily, thick and rich in a way Ranboo knows he'd have a bitch of a time trying to speak it. At the continued silence, he worries he's drug the mood of their afternoon down, about to apologize when Tubbo asks, "Do you...ever wanna talk about it?"

"About...Ender culture?" Ranboo tries, purposefully misunderstanding, *knows what he's really referring to cold nights empty hallways backs of heads and sharps claws and slitted eyes*, grimaces as Tubbo says, "No, I mean- if you want sure, I'm all ears. But I meant the palace...about growing up there, everything that happened."

Blowing air hard out of his nose, Ranboo skates his claws along the glazed ceramic of the latte cup, stops when they make a light shrieking noise and tucks his hand under the table. Talking about Voidfall is one of the *last* things he wants to do, doesn't see much worth in

dragging out all the horrible things that happened, knows there's no way to change it, would just make whoever he's telling feel bad, *especially* doesn't want to burden Tubbo with this.

*It's all in the past shouldn't matter but it affects you even now everything you're dealing with is because of then yeah but can't change any of it why talk about it remember what Dream said how it helped him not feel so alone I don't know I don't know can't won't it'd make him sad never told a soul-* Ranboo jolts at the warm touch that wraps around his hand under the table, only realizing then his claws have been picking at the skin of his palm, shoulders drooping in defeat because *why does he keep doing this he doesn't want to so why-*

“Hey, stelle, it's okay, you don't have to tell me. I know you're a private person but I just... want you to know I'm there, okay? I'll *always* be here.” Tubbo says gently, fingers tangling through Ranboo's so he'll stop picking at himself, *got your back never leaving you always be here*, and Ranboo swallows harshly, “I just...none of it's good, and I...I don't want to weigh you down with it.”

Tubbo's quiet for a minute and when Ranboo sneaks a glance at him, his eyes are unfocused, teeth chewing absentmindedly on a thumb, notices he's being watched and lets it go, begins slow, like he's put a lot of thought into it, “I understand that feeling. I don't like talking about...about *my* stuff either unless it's family...and I was, um, like...uh, *wow*, this is a lot harder to say than I thought-”

He sucks in a big gulp of air and stares Ranboo directly in the eyes, squeezes their hands together for good measure, “And I was hoping I could be that for you, someone safe, like *f*-family.”

*Long series of photographs hung up on the wall smiling faces and laughing dark eyes gathered together around big tables arms draped over one another,* and Ranboo's avoided that word a lot in his life, has never meant anything but pain and anxiety and expectations to him, but he doesn't think he'd mind it if it's anything like Tubbo knows it to mean.

And they're married, making them family by law, but Ranboo hasn't really been considering Tubbo like he's a place of refuge, has been holding him at arm's length, keeping him away from everything Ranboo deems unsightly, but maybe he doesn't have to, maybe he can trust just a little bit, showed his physical scars and Tubbo didn't leave him.

He *stayed*, he's still here, sitting next to Ranboo in a little Railasian café, chair scooted as close as he can get, thumb dragging warm shapes over the hand that was picking at skin like a blight, *got your back*, and Ranboo takes a deep breath, means it when he whispers, “You already are. My family, I mean. I-I love you.”

“I love you too.” Tubbo says with no hesitation, tips his head to the side, cariad bead flashing around the side of his ear, *my bead my bead on his braid my husband my cariad*, and it's the little nudge Ranboo needs, words starting to tumble free, “Um, Voidfall was a nightmare, it... it twisted everything to the point that living there was just- *an ongoing anxiety attack.*”

*Always had to be on your toes tracking everything out of the corner of your eyes long lists of people that you hated that hated you trying desperately to be a step ahead of them,* Ranboo wets his dry lips and shakes his head, looking away from Tubbo's tender eyes, stares down at

the table top, “I...they always told us that’s how it was, that it was to keep us safe, a-and they weren’t entirely wrong. That place was a cesspit.”

*Shown how to minimize bleeding from a young age quick sign of poison in things taught to never turn your back claws at the ready how fast could you teleport stab them in the back before they get you,* and his eyes drift from the table to where his left arm is still stretched out even though Tubbo’s been done drawing for a while, “They raised me to be a monster a-and I don’t want to be like that anymore but...b-but I-I’m terrified *I a-am*, that t-this is it. That it went too deep, *that I can’t escape*...that this i-is *me*.”

Nestled right near the crook of his elbow is a bee inside a hexagon, simplified in its design but drawn with smooth, crisp lines, wings flared out to the side and filled in with hair thin veins, and Ranboo untangles their hands so he can touch it, fingertips smoothing over it lovingly. “I never told you what I saw...on Bosnoir?” He murmurs, voice gone thick with the emotions rising in his chest, staring at this little bit of Tubbo he’s been given, is already mourning it rubbing off and wraps a hand around it protectively.

“No...” Tubbo answers hoarsely, clears his throat and scoots closer until their legs are pressed together, “Lez said...she said it was supposed to be like...a final test right, f-for the initiates. Your greatest fear?”

*Greatest fear greatest nightmare an absolute terror worst thing you could ever imagine,* looks up from the little bee drawing, *elegant and beautiful and perfect,* stares at the person who made it, *kind loving everything you’re not,* the person he loves more than anything, *the one he’d die for,* whispers brokenly, “I-It was *you*. It was *you*, Tubbo, and this- I-I was...I hurt you I-like on, um, like on Imuna but worse. *So much worse*. I- I told y-you to- t-to- I-I was *them Bo*, I-I became *them*-”

“You’re *not*.” Tubbo stresses, darting forward and cupping his face in a searing palm, fingers curling behind his ear, “I’m sorry, I know I interrupted but Queens of *fucking* ages past, *you’re not*, you’re nothing like them Ranboo-”

“You know what the statistics say, a-a third of a-abu- o-of um, of a-abuse victims-” It’s a horrible struggle to get the words out, rest of it choked off by dread and Tubbo speaking fast over him, eyes on fire, hand starting to shake where it grips his face, “*No*, no! Fuck that! That’s not *you*, that’s some dumb fucking number it’s not *you*.”

Sniffling hard, Ranboo breaks eye contact, doesn’t want to start crying in public, but his head is gently tipped back up, face cradled in too warm hands, “You’re not an abuser, *you’re not*, and when you lashed out at me on Imuna that was partially my fault. I was backing you into a corner and I *knew it*.”

He wants to argue, *is going to*, but Tubbo lifts one of his hands, tucks hair behind his ear and strokes along his braid, fiddling with the bead at the end, “I’m so sorry, Boo, we hardly knew each other, I shouldn’t’ve tried to make you talk to me before you were ready.”

“D-Don’t make e-excuses for me-” Ranboo chokes out, clamps his mouth shut because his voice pitches up at the end, betraying the sobs that are bubbling in his throat, knows there’s

nothing that makes what he said okay, how he did it on purpose, *how he looked Tubbo in the eyes and knew he cared for him but shoved it out and went after him anyway.*

“I know. *I* know it was wrong, *you* know it was wrong, so it’s not an excuse it is...an allotment. You were scared, *I made you scared*, you were just trying to protect yourself.” Tubbo tells him gentler than he deserves, hand wrapping briefly around his head, *like your hand so long ago don’t leave please stay*, “You have been through actual hell. They hurt you so much, it made you think that was okay, but you’re safe now...you can finally heal.”

Eyes drifting down to his slashed up arm, black lines masking some of the damage but not erasing it, thinking back to the weeks he was comatose, kept waiting to die, how he flew off the handle, nearly killed someone with his bare hands, Ranboo can’t stop the sob that tumbles free, shakes his head emphatically, “I-I’m *not t-though*, I-I keep g-get- getting *w-worse*.”

“That’s not true. You’re doing so much better, you’ve been more open with me, you’re making friends, you’re *actively* trying to move past your trauma, you smile so much more now, have you noticed?” Tubbo says softly, fingers brushing across Ranboo’s cheek, and he leans into the touch, wants to believe him so *badly*, “It takes time yeah, but you’ve come so far so quickly, it’s amazing. You’re incredible, Ranboo, one in a million, I love you so much.”

“I l-love you too.” Ranboo hushes, clearing his throat roughly a few times, instincts telling him Tubbo’s lying, that he’s deluded, *crazy*, making things up, but there’s a voice he hasn’t heard aloud in years whispering *wouldn’t lie to you he’s your cariad have to trust him should trust him he’s your one your other half will always be there for you will love you no matter what it’s written in the stars in your veins in his eyes.*

And it goes against everything he was taught, but Ranboo decides to trust it, *trust Tubbo*, takes his words and overwrites the ones that’ve been swimming like dark shadows under murky waters, *abuser abuser abuser* getting replaced with *not you* and *so much better* and *you’re incredible*, warbles brokenly in the back of his throat, “I love you...I-I wanted to tell you for s-so long.”

Tubbo shifts forwards and wraps him in a hug, one set of arms going around his neck the other around his waist, and Ranboo shudders, practically melting into the warmth he radiates, *the safety the love home you’re home like this never wanna be anywhere else*, Tubbo murmuring right by his ear, “Me too.”

The sun’s started to go down by the time they leave the café, painting the sky rich reds and purples, blushing all of the light colored buildings varying shades of pink, and Ranboo’s lost in thought, doesn’t exactly feel better, but certainly doesn’t feel worse and maybe that’s what everyone always meant. Talking about it didn’t magically fix everything, he’s still scared and haunted by things, dealing with the aftermath, but it didn’t destroy anything either, and *that* thought does make him feel better.

*He’s staying*, Ranboo realizes what feels like very belatedly, staring down at Tubbo’s head where they walk side by side, *he’s really actually staying with me*, and remembering their earlier conversation, swings his tail up, curls it around Tubbo’s waist and gently tugs him against his side. Tubbo looks up at him and even in the pink light, Ranboo can tell he’s

embarrassed, but he doesn't move away, hesitantly moves his left arms to hold him as well, fingers scratching a little at his sides.

"So..." Tubbo begins in a tone that is trying hard to be casual and failing miserably, won't meet Ranboo's eyes when he looks at him in question, just tips his head to the side, "It's almost the eighty fifth of Digwad- Digwod- *fuck whatever- Eventide*, it's almost the eighty fifth of Eventide."

Ranboo runs it back in his mind and does the conversions from Annwyl's rotational cycle relative to HQ's, is shocked when Tubbo's *right*, it is the eighty fifth in a few days, it's his *nameday* in a few days. An entire year has passed and Ranboo could not have predicted this is where he would've ended up, lightyears away from the Academy, from Voidfall, *married* to his best friend, working for the Syndicate and exploring the galaxy with his cariad by his side.

"Wow..." He murmurs a little choked up, reeling over how much can change in less than a year, jostled out of his reminiscing when Tubbo coughs obvious and fake, "Yeah and I uh- I kinda had this idea but um, I-I'm realizing now a uh, *surprise* m-might not be what you prefer so yeah, but anyway, I kinda maybe have a sort of party planned?"

Snapping his head down, Ranboo opens his mouth, lost for a second in, *glittering lights glittering daggers fake smiles presented to you on the dancefloor whispering behind your back know you can hear look it's the little odd-eyed insane prince*, finally manages, "W-What kind of party?"

"Just something small, few friends, anyone you wanna invite really, but if that's not something you'd like that's okay too." Tubbo says, finally looking up at him, and he's never been good at hiding his emotions, *has never had to be*, earnest honesty in his eyes and gentle smile, "Birthdays are kinda a big thing at my house. I just want to make you feel special, but it's whatever you want, stelle."

*Whatever he wants?* In the past it would've been to see his father, maybe get five minutes of his undivided attention, but now, Ranboo's not sure, *lie know exactly what you'd want but too afraid to ask for it know you're entitled spoiled selfish*, and he grimaces, fingers flexing because they want to go for his arms and can't.

"You don't need to do that for me. I'm fine not doing anything really." He says lightly, smiles but it doesn't reach his eyes and he can't force it to, bemoans the days where he could as Tubbo's brows furrow, "Okaaay...but is that what you *want*? Or what you *think* you should want?"

*I want to wake up in bed next to you I want to listen to all the ways you love me I want you to give me compliments and play with my hair and spend the day with me*, Ranboo thinks desperately, ears bobbing down with nerves just hearing it in his head, knows it sounds hopelessly needy and clingy, but Tubbo's staring at him, waiting for an answer and he shrugs, dropping his eyes, "I-I'm fine I pro-

"*Stelledore.*"



Ranboo glances up at that warning tone, sees Tubbo smiling at him in exasperation, stern set to his brows but affection in his eyes, figures he can compromise a little and tips his head back and forth, "I just, um, I-I'd just like to spend the day w-with you."

"Of course, Boo, no problem at all. Would you wanna see anyone later? Ozzi? Dream and the others?" Tubbo hedges, clear this is important to him, and the idea of him doing things for Ranboo, organizing a whole event *for him*, no matter how small, makes his tail bristle in nerves. He's not sure how many people know who he really is, *Ranboo Zeethotad Third of his Name Eighth Prince of Ender and Eleventh in Line*, but he's hyper aware of making sure he doesn't come across as spoiled or like he expects anything to be handed to him, like he needs special treatment.

And all this party sounds like to Ranboo is a chance for people to figure that out, to put two and two together, look at him and go, *huh, you know what he is nothing more than a whiny brat thinks the whole universe revolves around him*, but Tubbo wants to throw him a party, as- *insane* as that sounds. For some reason, this matters to him, celebrating Ranboo's nameday with a group of people, and he's trying to hide it, but there's a pleading light in his eyes and Ranboo caves, has never been able to say no to him.

"Y-Yeah that'd be nice- um, j-just small okay? N-Nothing major." He relents and Tubbo tries to stop how he bounces in excitement, but Ranboo can see the way his wings flare wide open for a minute, smiles at the palpable joy he seems to radiate.

"Yes! You sure? Okay, okay! Cool! Yeah, no worries! We'll do small, just a couple people from the hall, things like that and then I was gonna make-!" Tubbo clicks his mouth shut fast, grins up at Ranboo with a sly smirk, and wags a finger back and forth at his questioning look, "Nuh uh, no more secrets for you, birthday boy! I'm going to spoil you *rotten*."

Ranboo's heart lurches painfully, lungs constricting tight as wind roars in his ears, feet stumbling for just a second because *he's back up there*, can see Cyllellniad spread out before him End crystals and black sands as far as the horizon stretches, shakes his head because *it's not real he's not there calm down get a grip you're fine-*

*Said he was going to spoil you rotten what a joke doesn't he know you're already there*, a deep voice intones off to his left and Ranboo spins on his heel, pulse jackhammering loud under his skin but there's no one there, *there's no one there*, he's hearing things, *he's always hearing things but no he got rid of them he's imagining things aren't you always poor little psychopath-*

Shrieking laughter and he jerks around to stare wide eyed behind him but the path is empty, just the setting suns turning everything a rich purple *just like the ends of her dress*, last of the light sliding out of the sky, and he's okay he's okay *he's okay they're not there he's fine they're gone right right rIGHT*, jumps about a foot in the air hearing, "Hey you okay?"

Thank the Ancients, but when Ranboo trips to look over his shoulder, there's a corporal body standing there, and he can breathe for a second, *you're fine you're fine you're fine all in your head it's okay calm down*, then registers the concerned set to Tubbo's face and realizes he needs to do damage control *now*.

“Y-Yeah- *yeah*, I’m fine.” Ranboo forces out evenly, tight grip on his vocal cords and makes sure they don’t waiver, keeps his arms still at his sides and takes the shaking fear deep inside, let’s it rock his hallway, loose dust and stones raining down around him while he smiles, “Sorry! You know how sensitive my ears are, some piece of machinery hit a hole in the road a few streets over, sounded like blaster fire’s all.”

*Believe it don’t ask questions just take it accept it trust me shouldn’t trust me but do it anyway*, and Tubbo waivers for a second, eyes darting around like *he’s not sure like he can see like he KNOWS*, but he relents, *he relents he buys it he doesn’t ask*, tips his head side to side, “Yeah, okay, Boo. Sorry it spooked you so bad. Let’s...get back, yeah?”

Ranboo hums his agreement, steps up to Tubbo’s side and wiggles his tail back around his waist as they head down the sidewalk again, trying to recapture some of the contentment from earlier, but Ranboo’s struggling to, even after Tubbo tucks two arms across his back, rolls his neck agitatedly and can’t shake the feeling of claws curling over his shoulders.

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### **Lesson Thirty-Six: Being vulnerable is weak-being weak is a death sentence-but he’s so alone it hurts-**

The lesson is really dragging today, Ranboo not paying attention like he’s supposed to where Meleeri’s writing up on the blackboard, staring off into space in a grey haze that’s been clouding his head on and off for a year now. Today is an extra hazy day and Ranboo hadn’t wanted to get out of bed, stayed curled up in his nest of pillows, ignored the servants calling for him until the head maidservant had to come in and pull him out herself.

His tail drags behind him slowly at the memory, how her hands under his arms felt *so good*, somehow managed to banish the full body aches he’s been having, pain settling in his arms and legs like he’s sick. The doctors say he’s fine whenever they’re summoned to check on him, sat him down once and had a very confusing conversation on how grief affects everyone differently, but Ranboo hadn’t really understood and they didn’t really care to help him understand.

The pain’s been creeping up on Ranboo again since this morning, and it’s making it hard to focus, shivery, cold twinges rattling up and down his spine, queasy pang in his nerves like he’s scared but there’s nothing to be scare-

*Shrill beeping that you drown out with your screams hands hauling you away last image you see of her disappearing behind a crush of bodies no no NO take me back take ME BACK NO LET ME GO TOO-* Ranboo jolts at the sharp crack against his desk, turns guilty eyes up to a glowering Meleeri and bows his head, voice catching as he tries to apologize, “S-So-S-Sorry, g-govern-ness, I-I-”

“Stop stuttering and pay attention! It’s unbecoming for a prince to be so inarticulate.” She barks and Ranboo nods his head because he *knows*, and he used to be doing better, but it’s just gotten bad again for some reason, *maybe because you don’t speak so much now that m-m- n-now that she’s d-*

Whatever he was thinking gets garbled up with crackling static, and Ranboo feels like he slips out of his body, floats somewhere up by the rafters as Meleeri turns to finish the lesson, whatever's been left behind in his head answering her questions without any input from him.

Ranboo floats lost, thinks he might be asleep or something but no, that's not right. His nights are plagued with horrible images of people crumbling to dust in front of him, everyone he cares for slipping out of his hands no matter how hard he holds on, and there's nothing like that here, it's nice, it doesn't hurt, he doesn't really want to leave.

But inevitably Ranboo does, floats back down only as they're ending for the day, feels like he's blinking awake and winces because *everything hurts now*.

"On your feet, your highness." Meleeri orders and he stumbles up automatically, stands by his desk and tries to control his shaking while she goes to wipe the board clean, will only dismiss him once the chores are done.

There's a desperate, clawing ache consuming him, seems to come from his bones and *it hurts so much have to make it stop Ancients it hurts he's scared wants it to stop please make it stop*- mind helpfully reminding him of earlier, *maid servant's hands under your arms it helped it made it stop try it again*, sees one of Meleeri's hands hanging by her side as she cleans the chalkboard, and hesitantly slinks up to her.

For a second, everything's fine as he wrap his fingers around hers, but then her hand is gone, ripped out of his grip like she's been burned, and Meleeri whirls on him, livid fire in her eyes as she demands archly, "*What*, in the name of the Void Below, *do you think you are doing?*"

"I-I-I- j-j- I- s-sorry I- just- i-it- I- i-it *h-hurts*-" Ranboo frantically tries to explain, curling his hands up to his chest so they won't reach for her again and backs away as she slices a hand through the air, "*It hurts? That's your explanation? Ancients of the Deep, I am not your late Queen Mother, I am not here to coddle you and make you weak, do you understand me?*"

He doesn't, *he doesn't understand anything doesn't know why his body hurts why his brain can't think wants his mama wants to cry knows he's not allowed to*, jerkily nods his head anyway but Meleeri sighs like she can tell he's lying, fixes him with a stern glare, "Almost half a century raising royal children and I have never lost a charge, and I do not intend to break that record with *you*. Don't ever be so familiar with me again."

"Y-Yes m-ma'am." Ranboo whispers because that's a safe answer and Meleeri dismisses him with a flick of her wrist, doesn't tut as he cuts a perfect bow for once, scuttling out of the study before he can break down crying. Every step back to his chambers jostles and irritates the pulsating pain settled under his ribs, in his joints, has Ranboo sniffing pathetically as he reaches out frantically for anyone that strays near him a second too long.

Serving girls pry him off like he's an endermite, shake their heads and flee down the hall, the guards won't even stop, sweep past on their way somewhere else, footmen doge him handmaids break eye contact other courtiers recoil as if he's diseased, tittering behind fans as he staggers into his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Sliding down to sit on the floor, Ranboo sobs, arms wrapping tight around himself trying to find some comfort because no one will touch him, they won't hold him or ruffle his hair, *nobody wants him has anyone ever mama does mama has mama did but she's gone she's gone and he's alone he's so very alone* and he wails, shaking hands frantically petting through his hair.

It's not the same it's not *the same it's not the same*, doesn't feel like when mama did it *feels like nothing*, and his claws bite into his scalp, bright hot pain that flares out and cuts through the weeping, tearing agony in his chest, zeros his mind in on that instead. Pressing in harder, Ranboo forces himself to get his breathing under control and tips his head up to gaze out at his empty room.

His lower lip wobbles again, *alone alone alone so alone everything hurts you're alone*, squeezes his eyes shut and imagines there's someone sitting across from him, wavering, gossamer outline of someone that tilts their head in sorrow, moving to sit next to him, arm falling around his shoulders.

"T-Tell m-me a s-story?" Ranboo hiccups, slumping over into the contact, *into the doorframe no no it's a shoulder it's the warm side of someone*, trills brokenly as a hand cards through his hair, *too small no it's not it's big it's safe it cares for you*, snuffles quieting down as he listens to a smooth voice that sounds like nothing tell him a story he's heard before but that's okay.

Someone's there and nothing else matters.

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Mornings have become his absolute favorite, and it's weird, cause Ranboo always considered himself a Night Owl before, or just a Never Slept Owl, but now he loves the mornings, looks forward to cracking bleary eyes open and seeing a mop of dark hair smooshed into the pillow next to his every day. It's no different today, and he trills sleepy and happy at Tubbo's peaceful face, wiggles closer and tangles their legs up, tail wrapping around his waist to help pull him in.

Ranboo shifts his head down and brings their foreheads together, tries to be gentle nuzzling Tubbo so he doesn't wake him up, and Tubbo grumbles petulantly in his sleep, the sound smoothing out into something more fond before Ranboo can draw back, semi coherent words mumbled into his pillow, "Mmm'mote...stelle...amor v'tae mia...Boo amote..."

His Apian's still not perfect, but Ranboo's been trying to pick up more in his free time, recognizes a few of the words whispered into the overall quiet of their dorm, purrs rumbling deep in his chest hearing *I love you* fall out of Tubbo's unconscious mouth. Ranboo snuggles closer, takes Tubbo in his arms and cards careful claws through his hair, murmuring unbearably sweet in Enderian, "*Love you so much, make every day worth it. I could live a thousand lives and never be happier than I am having you in my arms, love you sunshine, love you so much.*"

At the sound of his voice, Tubbo starts shifting, whines in the back of his throat and Ranboo loosens his hold, smiles mushily watching his face scrunch up as he stretches. Twisting so his

wings can flare all the way open, Tubbo presses into Ranboo's hands, and very very lightly, Ranboo runs fingertips over where they connect to his back, feels him shiver in response.

"Good morning." Ranboo whispers, smiling when dark blue eyes crack open, haze in them gone after a few blinks, corners crinkling in an answering smile as Tubbo mumbles, "G'mornin' birthday boy, happy nameday."

*He remembered he remembered he remembered first thing out of his mouth on his mind he thinks about you knows things about you he remembered,* Ranboo thinks in giddy surprise, smile growing to bear all his teeth as he scoots forwards to rub their foreheads together again, laughing incredulously "Morning, heulwen."

"M'you said tha' already." Tubbo giggles, pressing back into the contact and stretches his antenna out, flicking the tips of them along Ranboo's lone horn, "Mmm, what you wanna do today?"

Ranboo hasn't been thinking about it much, is already more than content with this, and he doesn't like asking for things anymore but some combination of just having woken up, head dizzy from the dregs of sleep and the heat Tubbo radiates, has him sighing carefree, "Dunno, b-but could you play with my hair? P-Please? Jus' for a little bit."

"Done." Tubbo murmurs, two arms wiggling free to reach up and card hands through his hair, fingers detangling as they go, and Ranboo sags boneless into the mattress, trilling so much it starts to catch weird, forcefully rubs his head into Tubbo's hands and grins at his quiet laughter, "You really like this, huh?"

"Mmm'yeah, can' help it." Ranboo slurs, words almost entirely lost with the way he's purring, ear flicking happily as Tubbo tucks hair behind it, "S'conscious response...hind brain stuff, precursor spe'ies things, bondin', I dunno...s' nice."

One of Tubbo's hands rubs tenderly around the base of his shattered horn and Ranboo straight up *warbles* in response, can't stop the way his tail thumps happily from the attention, sighs without thinking at all, "Mmm makes m'feel safe...cared for...*loved*, m'love you heul'en, love'ya so much only one for me."

He almost doesn't hear it, so out of his mind like he is, but as Ranboo wiggles closer, resting his forehead against Tubbo's sternum, he can feel that deep rattling hum he's only ever heard maybe once before, tries to match it in pitch, thoughts an endless stream of *cariad cariad cariad family safe love you cariad mine yours safe love you mine yours yours yours forever.*

They don't get out of bed for a while, Ranboo even kinda falling asleep again under Tubbo's hands but this time, he comes awake shrieking involuntarily. There's fingers tickling at his sides mercilessly, and he hisses at a cackling Tubbo, tries to get his sluggish limbs to respond fast enough, and they end up play wrestling, tossing and turning so much in a bid for the upper hand that they go tumbling out of the bunk yelling.

Ranboo lays sprawled on the floor with Tubbo right next to him, the sheets tangled up around their legs in a mess, laughing so hard his chest aches, abdomen jumping under his arm as he

turns to look at him, thinks he falls a little more in love seeing Tubbo with color staining his cheeks, head tipped back in giddy joy.

It's probably the laziest morning they've had in a while, Tubbo tries to get him to make his bed, *their bed*, like he does every morning, and Ranboo whines the entire time, drags his feet and does such a pathetic job Tubbo pushes him out of the way, but Ranboo just hangs off his side and loves the way he smiles, *loves that he can make him smile*.

The party is planned for later in the day cycle since some people are getting back from missions this afternoon, which leaves Ranboo with a good chunk of time he doesn't know what to do with, usually lets Tubbo make the plans on their off days, but now he's got a pair of lovely eyes fixed on him wondering what he wants to do.

"Um, I-I don't know-" *Not an acceptable answer brows drawn down got that adorable little stubborn set to his face okay no focus think of something*, and Ranboo shrugs, uncomfortable to be put on the spot like this, and ruffles a hand absentmindedly through his hair, "Uuuh, we c-could go to the range?"

He suggests it because they usually do target practice at least once a week, knows they've both missed their regular session for a while now, *his fault wasn't allowed to have a firearm until recently*, but as Ranboo's standing in front of the counter, ears pinned down by insulated headphones, changing power cells out quick and efficient, waiting for the light to come on, he realizes he's *excited*.

With the thick headphones covering his ears, any sounds that came back are muffled and seem to be a thousand miles away, narrowing his focus down entirely to the range in front of him, comforting weight of the blaster in his hands. Anticipation curls hotly in his gut, makes his breaths go all shivery with excitement and when the light blinks on, Ranboo doesn't hesitate, raises his arm and fires.

Aftershocks travel up his arms, reverberating around his skull and ground him in the moment as his eyes dart from target to target, mind calculating almost too fast to follow, his arm moving to the next coordinate in a fraction of a second. *Find target pinpoint where you want shot to go don't blink don't breathe depress trigger recoil shuddering trembling bright red flash it hit it hit it HIT find next target-*

Ranboo doesn't have space for any other thought as the targets whiz past, heart thundering loudly in his ears, arm tingling pleasantly with the numbing sensation of continued blaster recoil, and nothing else exists right now. It's just him and how fast his mind can work, how steady his hands are, how sharp his eyes, *it's just him and the knowledge of what he can do*, bright red snap crackle of blaster rays and another target down.

His breathing is steady his hands steadier, like the firm press of the earth under his feet, *unflinching and unwavering*, eyes fast *mind faster, so sharp so quick so good to him so good for him loves it loves the way it works thinks he might love him-* only comes tripping back to reality when the blaring green light at the end of the range winks off, sets his blaster down with shaking hands and forces himself to remember where he is.

Ranboo can hear his name being yelled through the muffled suppression of the headphones, slings them around his neck and gets jerked around not a second later, Tubbo screaming incoherently as he points excitedly at the scoreboard. The entire Syndicate uses the range, all ninety six of them, and for all the fantastic marksmen they have, no one's ever gotten a perfect score, closest being Techno himself.

Someone whistles, *sounds like Dwayne it's probably Dwayne*, a few others hollering out *congrats* and *nice shootin' kid* and *fuck it up beanpole*, emotions building painfully warm and excited in his chest, feels like racing down back alleyways, bounding across the plains of Apidae, waking up next to the love of his life, beautiful and perfect and *everything he's ever wanted*.

His breathing picks up sharply, elated smile tugging his lips up, spastic shaking trembling up from his hands because *that's his name, that's HIS NAME up there*, sitting pretty right beside a beautiful *nine thousand nine hundred and ninety nine*, next closest score about a thousand way, and too loud laughter tumbles out of Ranboo, *euphoria* making him feel punch drunk and stupid *because that's him that's his name he did that he's good he's smart he loves his brain he loves himself*-

“*Boo! Stelle- amote! Ha, LOOK! Y-You- I- Queens past, LOVE-!*” Tubbo’s yelling inarticulately, and Ranboo swings around, scoops him up in a hug and spins them both in a circle, doesn’t care if anyone’s staring, knocks their foreheads together and screams happily with him.

They go through a couple drills together, standing back to back while targets circle them, but Ranboo isn’t paying attention to them, wraps his tail around Tubbo’s leg and purrs feeling him lean into the contact, rubbing his head in-between Ranboo’s shoulder blades. It’s the worst either one of them has ever done, but they leave that section of the range arm in arm, feet stepping into each other’s personal space, make something like a game out of it as they awkwardly shuffle across the floor.

And Ranboo’s never been happier in his entire life than when Tubbo squishes his face between two hands out in the locker room, others looping behind his back, drags him down to nuzzle their foreheads together, voice elated and soaring as he declares, “I am *so fucking* proud of you, you’re the most amazing person who’s ever existed and I love you to the ends of time.”

Ranboo makes some noise halfway between a laugh and a sob, slips his hands under Tubbo’s wings and hugs him back, thumbs dragging gentle shapes across his jacket, right over where his wings connect, grins like a stupid, giddy idiot hearing the way Tubbo quietly buzzes involuntarily, and hopes he pronounces it right when he says, “Amote con toto corde mia, lusole.”

Tubbo freezes, and being as close as he is, Ranboo sees it immediately when his eyes start to water, knows his attempt was at least understandable, and hums gently as Tubbo surges forwards, burying his face in Ranboo’s neck. “I mean it, Bo.” Ranboo whispers into the hair right by his ear, holds him close while Tubbo stammers *I love you’s* into his skin like that’s the one thing he was put in this galaxy to do.

Lunch is a thing that needs to happen, and by now, word of his perfect score has spread, and on the way to the cafeteria, Ranboo is assaulted with screaming congratulations and a variety of what he assumes are celebratory noises in people's native cultures. There's *so much attention*, people smiling at him telling him he did a good job, that *they're impressed that they're proud*, and he doesn't know how to handle it, shrinks down into his bomber's collar and shyly tells them thank you.

He's decently pleased with himself, but it's another thing entirely to hear that other people are, and Ranboo *wants* to take joy in this *so badly*, but he's not sure it's right, afraid of being spoiled and self-centered and a hundred other horrible things. A gentle touch at his jaw drags him out of his cycling thoughts, and he looks down to see Tubbo grinning at him, fingers warm under his chin, "Hey, chin up. You're now officially the coolest motherfucker here, *own it.*"

"But I just- i-it's not a *big deal*, r-really, I just..." Ranboo trails off, shrugging his shoulders helplessly, and Tubbo moves his hand, fitting it more surely against his cheek, voice kind, "You can be proud of yourself, Boo. You just did something really *amazing*, bask in it for a while, you've earned it."

It's not really like Tubbo's giving him permission, more like he's showing his acceptance, letting Ranboo know it's *okay, it's okay to be happy be proud to hold his head high and feel warm and excited and stupid when people turn to him*, and Ranboo nods, squares his shoulders, doesn't hold himself ridged but holds himself well, eyes slitting the next time someone offers him praise.

By the time they get something to eat, Ranboo whining the entire time about how much he hates the replicator, all for the way it makes Tubbo laugh, it's not that much longer until four. Tubbo's returning messages with only a right hand as they head back to their hall, left hands tied up holding Ranboo's or curled around his arm, tells him absentmindedly they should probably hit the showers before the party.

"Are *you* insinuating I *smell bad*?" Ranboo huffs indignantly, sticking his nose in the air but looks back down at the warm head that tips onto his shoulder, Tubbo grinning up at him impishly, "Noooo, just looking out for your best interests, bossman. You've got fantastically awful bedhead."

Ranboo doesn't even need to check, has seen his hair in the mornings before he's put anything in it and shakes the whole mess in Tubbo's direction, sticks his tongue out after Tubbo does the same.

He's getting his stuff together once they get back to the dorm, humming distractedly under his breath but stops when Tubbo clears his throat, looks over his shoulder and spins to his feet, ears flying up because Tubbo's grinning at him holding two colorfully wrapped boxes.

"Happy nameday!" Tubbo crows, presenting the boxes with a bounce- *gifts they're gifts he bought you things he got you presents* -holds out the bigger one in his lower hands, "Here, start with this one! You'll see why!"



Ranboo can't move, *he can't move can't seem to remember how to make his body work*, stands there and awkwardly shuffles his feet together, for some reason horribly embarrassed and *guilty*. There's a score of things he wants to say, *you didn't have to I don't need it I'm not spoiled I don't deserve it*, but he's having a hard time getting his thoughts in order.

Some parts want to sink down through the floor *don't need it not spoiled not entitled*, others desperate to take the gifts *gifts presents things for you*, and still more that feel horrible for being excited in the first place *spoiled brat entitled bitch sympathizer imperial dog*.

Tubbo's smile doesn't falter as the silence drags on, instead, slips into something a little less exuberant, *softer*, staring at where Ranboo has his hands all snarled up together over his chest, steps forward and says gently, "If it makes you feel better, this one's from my mom, but we both wanted to do something for you, okay? They're small things anyway, no big deal, stelledore."

It does *not* make Ranboo feel better knowing one came from Cissan, *why would she do that I'm nothing to her don't need things not entitled trying not to be at least*, and he doesn't want to take it, but Ranboo knows it would be unbearably rude to refuse. His nod heads of its own accord, and he stumbles until his legs hit the edge of the bunk and he can flop backwards, lets Tubbo set the larger box in his lap as he sits down next to him.

*Horrid thing spoiled brat*, whispers in his ears and the tips of them flick spastically, *entitled bitch think they have to buy you things to keep you happy*, claws scratching at his shoulders and Ranboo twitches, darts a glance behind him *but there's nothing there* he knows there's not so then *why is this happening he's fine he's happy he got rid oF HER-*

"You alright, Boo?" And Ranboo whips back around, face heating self-consciously as he resolutely refuses to make eye contact with Tubbo, stares down at the bright colored wrapping paper, random little squiggles on a vibrant blue background, and stammers, "I-I'm fine just- *n-nervous* I guess..."

The bed dips a little and then there's a warm weight settling around his waist, fingers stroking gently at his sides, "I understand and it's one hundred percent okay if you don't wanna open anything right now, I knew you wouldn't want to in front of everyone...but I was um, *hoping* i-it'd be okay...just the two of us?"

*Knows you so well all the way down to your core all the cracks all the flaws all the fissures loves you anyway*, and Ranboo leans into Tubbo, dropping his head to rest on his, antenna flicking out to the side to give him space, huffs quietly as his claws worry at the paper, "I just...I-I just know I don't deserve this-"

"You deserve the universe." Tubbo tells him matter-of-factly, and he does this sometimes, just- *says shit casually* like it doesn't rock Ranboo to his core, like it's the simplest of truths and not the most earth shattering thing he's ever heard. *How can you think that*, Ranboo turns his face and presses his nose into Tubbo's hair, lips twitching when an antenna baps into him lightly, *what ever lead you to that conclusion don't deserve it never've deserved you thank you for deciding I'm worth something thank you for staying thank you for loving me all of me somehow someway you do and I'm so grateful every day*.

“Come on, birthday boy.” Tubbo murmurs, one of his hands finding where Ranboo’s are resting on the package, takes them and presses his fingers down lightly, pricking the paper with his claws, “Present time.”

Together, they unwrap the box, and maybe it’s a little silly, but Ranboo doesn’t feel as bad since Tubbo’s doing it with him, can trick his brain into thinking that this isn’t about only him, pulls the cardboard flaps open and digs through layers of tissue paper. When he finally gets to what the gift actually is, Ranboo full on stops, stares at it with his mouth dropping open, knows this isn’t *any small thing*.

Very gently and very carefully, like it’s spun of the most expensive, most precious material, he pulls the garment out, lets the sky blue fabric unfold to its true size, stares in wonder at the sunflowers embroidered across it, little butterflies here and there, diamond shaped stars in a thick band along the hem of the skirt. Ranboo touches lightly at the thick green stalks of the sunflowers, traces fingertips up to their sunny yellow petals, thumbs tenderly at the cream colored wings of a butterfly and doesn’t know what to say, looks over at Tubbo a bit helplessly.

“She started making it after we left.” Tubbo explains, touching lightly at the fabric, gets a wicked smile on his face and laughs good naturedly, “Apparently when we uh- *stumbled home fucking hammered*, you wouldn’t stop telling her how much you liked the skirt so. She made you one, and oh- here. Card.”

Tubbo hands him an off white piece of paper with dried flowers pressed into the front, and Ranboo opens it in a haze, eyes darting over it reverently, can see in his mind’s eye Cissan sitting down at their long kitchen table writing this out with Benson snoozing at her feet.

*Crurito! Happy ~~Birthday~~ Nameday **Nameday!***

*I swear, Bo’s told me a hundred times and I still forget, mom brain. But anyway, I hope you’re having a wonderful day Ranboo! Sorry I can’t be there to give you a hug but tell Bo to do it for me or I’m mailing you all his journals from primary school.*

*Also, I hope the skirt fits okay, I just used the same pattern as the other but let me know if it needs altering, *dulcito*.*

*Hope you’re staying safe out there! Benson and I send all our best wishes!*

*-Cissan*

Folding the card back together, Ranboo strokes fingers along its edges, aching pain in his chest because he misses her so much, is a little surprised with himself because he hasn’t known her long, but it already feels like Cissan’s made a small home for herself in his heart. She’s unique in the way a lot of people in his life nowadays are, showed him such care and compassion right from the start, made him feel welcome in a place he really didn’t belong, and he can see those same feelings in the lines of her words.

Ranboo can parse what *dulcito* means from his recent language studies, *sweetie*, and his insides melt, drippy warm fondness at the endearment, but he still can’t figure out *crurito*,

has to clear his throat a few times before he feels confident asking, “W-What does um, w-what does *crurito* mean?”

“Huh? Oh! It means like...*legs*? But an affectionate form, *leggy* might be better.” Tubbo says with a laugh, knocks his knee into Ranboo’s and hums apologetically, “Sorry, mom really likes giving nicknames, Queens past, have you ever heard the like, *thousands* she calls Benson? It’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t mind. I like it.” Ranboo murmurs, stares down at the heartfelt card in his lap and the skirt that has affection in every stitch, knows he’s never going to be able to make it up to her. He has absolutely nothing to show his own gratitude with and it’s frustrating, makes his tail flicker in agitation, but colorful squiggles fill Ranboo’s vision as Tubbo sets the smaller gift down in his lap, distracting him as fingertips drag off it slowly, his voice low and warm, “My turn.”

Ranboo unwraps this one by himself, hands stilling at the sleek black case, has had a lot of experience with jewelry boxes and flicks a questioning look at Tubbo, but he won’t meet his eyes, color on his face as Ranboo goes to flip the lid open, sure it’s just a repurposed box until he sees what’s nestled in satiny cloth.

*Curse him to the furthest ring and beyond that little fucking lair*, Ranboo thinks in dismay, not even *daring* to touch the glittering hair comb, gilded moonflowers and desert roses, sprays of tiny, silvery gold beads worked into the shape of anadl, graceful sweep of leaves and long golden threads that hang down the sides, so apparently obvious this cost *a small fortune* and is *NOT* ‘*a small thing*’.

“Why.” Ranboo croaks, eyes catching on new details every time he rakes them over the comb, stunned by how intricate it is, the flowers worked so delicately from metal they seem real, and he can’t help touching a shaking finger to one golden petal.

“Because I love you and you deserve nice things. Do you like it?” Tubbo hushes, tone in no way demanding, and the point isn’t if Ranboo *likes it*, *he does he does he does he adores it most beautiful thing he’s been given*, but the fact that Tubbo shouldn’t have done this, and Ranboo fires back whisper quiet, “How much did this cost?”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m not broke and I wanted to get you something special...you mean a lot to me, Ranboo.” Tubbo murmurs, hand moving to wrap around one of Ranboo’s frozen ones, searing fingertips trailing languorously across his skin, “Your hair’s getting so long, I-I thought you might like something pretty to put in it, and I know how much you like jewelry so.”

Ranboo recoils from the comb like he’s been burned, ears flicking back ashamed he’s so easy to read, *the spoiled little prince who’s always gotten everything he’s ever wanted*, had been hoping he was doing better, hasn’t worn hardly any jewelry in months, tries to blend in as much as possible. *You don’t like it though don’t feel like yourself when you catch your reflection feels like somethings not right*, a tender voice whispers and he shakes his head to get rid of it, as always missing the feeling of earnings swinging around with the motion.

“Hey, hey it’s okay if you don’t like it, we can exchange it or-”

*Broad line of his shoulders walking out with your book your present in his hand don't take it from me it's mine please don't*, and Ranboo can't help the way his hands curl protectively over the comb, stammering too fast, "N-No! N-No, I-I uh, I-I-I a-adore it I just- I-I don't know w-what to d-do I- I can't w-wear it-"

"What do you mean you can't-?" But Tubbo stops his question like he's remembered what Ranboo doesn't want to, and it *was months ago*, who would even remember it except for him and his stupid brain, broken and dumb and can't forget a single thing, and then Tubbo goes, "Is this...about what Sheje said to you?"

*Yes because that's all it took and my mind hyperfixated on it instantly churning out paranoia endlessly*, Ranboo grimaces, ducking his head and remembers those first few weeks, how he wore his jacket unsurely and earnings proudly, at least until that loud comment in the cafeteria, *damn who let the little rich boy in here what're you running from daddy find out how much you spend*, and Ranboo had to sit through rounds of laughter that echoed back long and terrible in his head, packed everything away the next morning and hasn't touched it since.

His silence must be answer enough, because Tubbo snarls under his breath, words spiking sharp and fast as he snaps, "That fucking dickhead, I *knew* I shoulda beat the shit outta'em. *Fucking hell-* Boo, listen to me, Sheje is a *fucking* moron, everything they say is bullshit."

"Was it though?" Ranboo mumbles and stares down despondently at where his hands are clawed over the hair comb, *spoiled brat entitled bitch think everything is yours elitist imperial dog*, forces them to drop their rigid posture and pulls back, "I *am* rich, o-or I *was*, a-and I-I know what that um, w-what that does, know it makes me s-spoiled a-and entitled a-and I'm trying *so hard* n-not to be like that anymore but-"

Ranboo exhales raggedly, ears drooping sadly at how much he adores the comb, how beautiful he thinks it is, not dissuaded at all by how much it cost, and whispers hoarsely, "B- But I guess I still am...if this is what you thought you had to get m-me."

"I didn't buy you this because I thought I had to, I got you it because I *wanted to*...do you trust me?" It's soft but it carries so much behind it, and Ranboo looks over at Tubbo, gentle set to his mouth, adoration and actual fire in his eyes, knows he'd follow him into the darkest pits of the void without a second thought, answers just as quietly but like it's the only constant in the universe, "Of course."

Tubbo smiles quick and fleeting, *kind endearing a thousand loving things just for you only for you*, face settling into something a little more solemn, but not harsh, as he says, "You taking the codex *was* entitled and spoiled-" and Ranboo winces, breaking eye contact because *he knows okay he remembers he regrets* "-but you know that now, and you're *not* like that anymore, you've moved past it."

Snapping his head back, Ranboo stares at him wide eyed, *he's lying he's h-he's-* but Tubbo said he'd never lie to him and Ranboo promised he'd trust him, so he really has no choice *but* to believe him, anxiety starting to chip away under his hands like crumbling sandstone.

“You liking jewelry and pretty things doesn’t mean you’re spoiled, it’s just a part of who you are and you shouldn’t have to feel ashamed of it.” Tubbo’s arms tighten around his back, hands splayed out blazing against his side, “I mean, I like collecting shit for my walls and spend *way* too much on ship parts, that doesn’t make me a uh...I dunno, a hoarder or something?”

“That’s different.” Ranboo tries to counter, but Tubbo props his chin up on Ranboo’s shoulder, firing back jovially, “Oh yeah? Is it ‘cause I’m not a prince? Well how do *you* know that, I could be uh...Prince Tubbo the Eighth, Kicker of Asses and Taker of Names.”

He makes himself snort at his own joke, eyes crinkling up as he giggles, “Okay, okay, so maybe I’d make a bad prince.”

“You’d be a wonderful prince.” Ranboo murmurs sincerely, and he really would, a good, proper one, like the ones in the books Ranboo reads, gentle and kind and caring, leans down and brings their foreheads together, “You’d make an even better king.”

This close, Ranboo can actually feel the uptick in body heat as Tubbo flushes, red bleeding up over his cheeks and the tip of his nose, antenna flicking once or twice, and Tubbo shakes his head, almost dragging their noses together. “*Queens past*, the shit that comes out of your mouth...” He shakily laughs, voice waivery like Ranboo’s never heard it, but before he can ask, Tubbo draws back, hands patting him once as they drop away, “Come on, shower time. W-We’re gonna be late.”

They’re both quick in the showers, mostly because some problem has come up, *it’s not a problem don’t worry Boo it is a thing not a problem stop calling it a problem*, and Tubbo has to go help fix the *totally definitely not a problem* problem. Ranboo insists Tubbo take five minutes and sit down so they can redo their braids before he leaves, swats at him repeatedly with his tail when he keeps moving to fiddle with his nicer pair of black combat boots.

“I gotta go, *stelle*.” Tubbo insists with a laugh, shrugging his bomber on over a light grey shirt, it settling on his shoulders and looking better than it ever has on Ranboo, turns to give him one last hug on his way out the door, “I’ll meet you back here in like twenty, okay? I just gotta go help with something.”

Ranboo lets him go with one final swat from his tail, goes about getting ready like he normally would, throw on pair of standard issue cargo pants and white t shirt, call it a day, when he turns around and is faced with the reality of a gorgeous summer sky skirt draped across his bunk.

He’s kicking his pants off not a second later, soft, airy fabric slipping through his hands, waistband of the skirt settling comfortably over his hips and Ranboo spins in a fast circle, happiness bubbling up in his chest all light and excited seeing the material flare out around his knees.

*Thank you*, Ranboo thinks, running his palms lightly over the material, makes *absolutely certain* not to prick any of the embroidery with his claws. He’ll have to go find some proper stationary to write Cissan a thank you card with later, maybe ask Tubbo what kind of sweets she favors, see if he can rope Dream into helping him figure out how to bake them.

What he has on should be fine to wear out, the skirt is absolutely, *breathtakingly* gorgeous, but it's not flashy, won't turn heads like his jewelry does, but Ranboo can't make his feet move towards the door, frozen in place staring down at the little black box, mind hyper aware of where his other one is stashed away and *really wants to*.

*Can't bad idea they'll all look at you whisper the same things spoiled brat entitled bitch snobby rich boy doesn't deserve to be here*, curls around him like wisps of black sand caught in the wind, and Ranboo takes a step back, halts though as a different voice demands, *fuck them who cares what they think you've proven you can do this that you belong here same as them*.

*Yeah well-* he tries to argue, but the voice bulls him over, *you've earned your place have flown your missions satisfactorily pay out your share with no complaints you belong-* and Ranboo shuffles his feet into a better stance, holds his shoulders steady, *you support the organization you follow their rules it's your name at the top of the scoreboard in the range*, reaches forward and takes the jewelry box, goes to find the other one he'd hidden away, *you're just the same as any of them best shot in the entire Syndicate if they have a problem fuck'em*.

He swaps out his t-shirt for something he hasn't looked at in *months*, the soft, white top with a high collar, long sleeves ending in tight cuffs at his wrists, teardrop shaped cutouts edged with green brocade at the shoulders and in the back. It feels surreal and yet so very familiar hooking all his earnings back in, ears comfortably heavy as they get reaccustomed to the weight, feels like something he's almost forgotten.

Standing in front of the small mirror in their room to fix his hair, Ranboo pulls a section of it back and fits the comb in place, leaves his braid free and a few shorter pieces of his bangs that tumble down into his eyes, turns his head to check and see if everything looks alright.

For the first time in a long time, he feels okay meeting his eyes in the mirror, tips his head and loves seeing warm gold shining against his dark hair, adores the way all his earrings swing at the movement, high collar of his top hiding the scarring on his neck and grins, elated as it scrunches his eyes up.

*I look nice*, he thinks, rotating his head back and forth admiring his reflection, stops mid-motion and watches his eyes go wide, thought he saw something he's only seen in paintings before as he twists his face back into a three quarters profile. His hair's almost down to his shoulders now, and half pulled back like this, something about the slope of his nose, the shape of his lips, upturned edge to his eyes, *it's eerie it's comforting he knows it*, and Ranboo presses trembling fingers into *her* high cheekbones, realizes a bit helplessly *I look like my mother*.

And the thought unwinds what feels like *years* of tension out of him, nightmares of father but with *Ranboo's* face replaced with the knowledge that he favors his mother, meets his eyes again and doesn't know how he's never seen hers in them. "I care for you." He whispers to the reflection of his mother's slanted gaze, *his own eyes him it's him care for you*, reaches up and thumbs gently at her bead capping the end of his braid, feels a hesitant touch at his right shoulder.

The door swishes open then, and Ranboo turns automatically, earrings wobbling back and forth and *ancients he's missed this missed it so much what was he thinking why did he ever deny himself something so small*, tail whipping behind him happily as Tubbo steps in. "Hey sorry about bailing I just had to...had...um..." And Tubbo trails off, completely frozen in place staring wide eyed at Ranboo, throat bobbing as he swallows once, voice rough when he mumbles, "*Reginae praeterita...*"

"Too much?" Ranboo hedges, head tipping to the side self-consciously, and Tubbo lurches forwards, waving all his hands frantically, "NO! N-No! Not at um, n-not at all I just- *Queens*, y-you look beautiful u-uh c-can I say that? S-Sorry I just-

"I-It's okay, I don't mind, I um, I-I actually like it- w-when you uh, compliment- b-but yeah. I really l-look okay?" Ranboo spins in a small circle, skirt swishing pleasantly against his knees as he comes to a stop, and Tubbo's eyes are fixed and glassy somewhere around his face, *about where the comb is in the back of his hair*, wets his lips before he hushes, "You look incredible, stelle, *fuck- Q-Queens it's so fitting, stelle starlight*, but you outshine them all. Every single one, stelledore."

That sends warmth curling all through Ranboo like the sweet summer breeze on Apidae, and he stands up a little straighter, eyes slitting in pleasure with his tail swinging in long sweeps behind him, tone equally subdued as he murmurs, "That so?"

Finally unsticking his feet from the floor, Tubbo edges closer, hesitantly reaches out with a set of hands but halts before actually touching Ranboo, won't until Ranboo steps forward into his arms, lower pair going around his waist, upper around the back of his neck. Fingers tug and play with the long strands of his hair, roll the hanging golden threads of the comb between them, and Tubbo stares directly into Ranboo's eyes as he whispers, "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

They head out the door hand in hand, and Ranboo worries he might be running a fever for a while, head dizzy and unfocused, face tingly warm with a pleased flush, can't stop smiling like an idiot as his mind plays back on repeat over and over again, *most beautiful most beautiful outshine them all look incredible outshine every single one beautiful*.

Tubbo must think Ranboo won't notice him sneaking furtive glances every now and then, but he should know better. Ranboo's been trained since birth on the art of looking and seeing without ever having to turn his head, can tell what he's doing *immediately*, and takes pride in the lingering looks, only worries though after Tubbo starts fiddling around with the edge of his shirt.

"You look very handsome." Ranboo says lowly with an idea of what might be bothering him, knows he guessed right as Tubbo snaps his head up, unsure light in his eyes as his mouth pushes to the side, *stubborn set to his face going to argue shouldn't bother you're right*, and Ranboo tugs him closer, "I mean it, heulwen, those boots are stylish and your pants are cut well. Your hair looks nice tonight and I adore the way it frames your face."

But Tubbo still doesn't look that reassured, so flicking his tail up, Ranboo strokes along the ends of his wings, keeps going, "I've always liked your Syndicate bomber on you, it's very

striking, you wear it a lot better than I do. In fact, the first time I saw you, I thought you looked *very* dashing.”

*Wait- wait did he just- shit*, he hadn’t really meant to say that *ever*, but it makes Tubbo light up, mouth dropping open in a surprised smile, “Wha-? Really?”

“Y-Yeah, I just um- I-like when I saw you on the landing pad, I uh, I-I-I just-” Ranboo stammers and, *Ancients*, why did he have to bring it up, remembers Tubbo standing there like it was yesterday, *messy hair falling in his eyes sleek cut of his jacket blasters on his hip dangerous and beautiful lines of the Eshachi arching over him*, mumbles embarrassed, “M’thought you I-looked like something o-out of a book, ya’know, *rakish* smuggler kinda thing.”

“A book? What kinda- Ranboo...*Ranboo*, please *please* tell me you’re talking about those goofy romance books like, *moms read*.” Tubbo asks in barely contained glee, and Ranboo refuses to answer him, snaps his head forward and keeps his chin up, furious blush on his face as Tubbo cackles like a madman. Eventually though, the amusement wears off, and Tubbo tips his head to rest on Ranboo’s arm, fingers flexing around his, “I love you so much you dork.”

And with a great heaving sigh, Ranboo squeezes back, tail fondly stroking at gossamer wings, “I love you too.”

Every dorm hall has a small communal space at the very end where people can go and hang out, get away from their rooms for a little bit, but Tubbo’s apparently commandeered the entire space for tonight. Big, paper stars hang down from the ceiling, spinning idly in the recycled air system, long strips of yellow streamers are taped to the walls, glittering sprays of some kind of decorations standing on the tables, and it’s nothing grand, but Ranboo gets choked up anyway because they all did this for *him*.

There’s a couple people hanging around already, Dream animatedly telling some story with George tucked into his side, Sapnap laughing so hard he accidentally sets a nearby star on fire, Ozzi and their partner Monto fiddling with something at the front of the room, couple others Ranboo knows Tubbo’s close with from the hall, but they all look up when he and Tubbo walk in, loudly greeting disjointedly, “Happy nameday!”

“Uh, h-hi- *um!* I- t-thanks.” Ranboo stutters awkwardly, not really used to being the center of attention like this, but thankfully nobody stands up to mob them like he worried they would, only thing that comes speeding at him like a photon blast who he was expecting.

“Kostka!” Ozzi shrieks happily, plowing into Ranboo with little inhibition, ramming the top of their skull into the underside of his chin as they hug him, “Salutations on this auspicious morn, the beyond loses much without you in it!”

“Hi, Ozzi.” Ranboo grimaces, using his free arm to hug them back, works his jaw because *ow*, that kinda hurt, and they pull back with a chattering laugh, orange eyes spitting and flickering in the dark sockets of their skull, “You look spiffy tonight, guy, I like it and oh! Con-granulations on the high score! You want a drink, I’m making drinks?”



“Uh...suuure?” Ranboo answers and is immediately yanked forwards, goes tripping after Ozzi as they haul him across the room to a table covered in a shimmering navy cloth, various bottles set out on top, mismatch of glasses that look more homey than anything. As it turns out, Ozzi is actually a really good bartender, flips bottles and shakers easily, doesn’t need to look to catch them on their arms or skull, can pour out multiple drinks at a time with steady hands and an endless stream of chatter.

The drink they hand Ranboo is faintly pink and fizzy, and he takes a hesitant sip of it, sweet, floral taste coating the inside of his mouth that tingles from the bubbles, and he makes a delighted noise, immediately going back for more. “Like it?” Ozzi asks, practically bouncing on their toes, shadow ears flickering wildly, and Ranboo shrugs, humming around the rim of his glass, “It’s alright.”

They sock him on the arm, but Ozzi’s laughing high and yipping, and Ranboo grins, hangs onto his glass as he’s coaxed into playing games with Tubbo and the others, and there’s not enough controllers, so he and Tubbo play on a team, swap off every other round. Ranboo doesn’t play a lot of video games, but it’s easy enough to pick up, and it’s nice, sitting wedged in between the searing heat of Tubbo and then Ozzi’s stupid pointy elbows, passing controllers back and forth.

There’s too many people crammed on the couch, elbows and asses in faces as people get up to bring back more drinks or snacks, gross, greasy wonderful bar food from a dozen planets spread out on a table in the back, has Ranboo’s mouth watering any time he gets up to grab some more, totally not biased in his love of the mushroom packed pastries Tubbo made.

It almost reminds him of his freshman year at the Academy, when he thought he had friends, but Ranboo thinks it might be real this time, laughing with everyone else as Dream loses horribly and slides off the coach wailing, doesn’t flinch when hands touch him lightly on the shoulders, people bending down to congratulate him on his shooting score or to offer their well wishes, accepts drink and food refills that are brought back over, everyone seeming to have some idea of what he likes.

*They know me thought I was the only one paying attention but they were too,* Ranboo thinks dumbfounded, sipping on another one of Ozzi’s cocktails, package of his favorite spicy crackers wedged between him and Tubbo, turns when George asks him something about this new quasar the Sunfleet’s been getting readings on, laughs deep in his chest watching Monto try and fail to vault over the back of the couch.

Ranboo feels like there’s stardust in his lungs, lighting up his veins, clouding his eyes and making everything hazy and wonderful. Somehow, he fits onto the couch like he’s always belonged, knows it more than anything when two arms go around his shoulders, pulling him closer, and tips his head to rest against Tubbo’s.

The racing game gets old after a while, and Monto ping pongs them around between various party games until a few hours in, when everyone’s a little more than reasonably tipsy and someone, Ranboo’s not sure who, demands they put on karaoke and is met with uproarious approval.

Everything devolves into chaos relatively quickly, there's too many songs that don't translate well into standard so most of the time, people are wheezing over poorly translated lyrics rather than actually singing, but it ends up not mattering. It's fun, *Ancients it's so much fun*, sitting on the couch by Tubbo and watching Dream try his hand at rapping as fast as he can, *he can't gets so tongue tied he shapeshifts on accident*, Zephyr and their partner doing a rendition of some song that has the horribly translated line '*never have is going to and also*' that makes the entire room lose it.

And Ranboo's not drunk, but he's certainly not sober, and the room spins a little and he laughs too loud, lets Ozzi drag him loose limbed up front and press a microphone into his hand, sings cheesy duets from secondary school rom-coms with them, both of them laughing so hard they're on the verge of crying.

Hot and slightly dehydrated, Ranboo's up getting something that's *not* alcohol after that last turn, Sapnap scream singing some love song in the background to a dying George, when arms go around his waist, pointed chin digging into his shoulder blades, and he turns back to look, grinning broad at Tubbo's flushed face.

"Hey, havin' fun?" Tubbo drawls, sounding also a little over tipsy, but it's nowhere close to how they both were during the solstice, and Ranboo turns in the circle of his arms, loops his own around Tubbo's neck, "Yeah, thank you so *so* much, heulwen."

"Of course, stelledore." Tubbo murmurs, stepping closer and propping his head up on Ranboo's sternum, beseeching look in his eyes, "Wanna dance?"

"To *this*?" Ranboo snorts, jerking his head to the front of the room and glances over, bursts out laughing at the sight of Sapnap on his knees in front of George, laughing through some gooey lyric that makes George groan and sets Dream off wheezing desperately.

"Why not?" Tubbo asks with a big grin, shuffling back and taking Ranboo with him, and *fuck it*, Ranboo can't really think of a reason not to, takes Tubbo's hands and leads them both in a dance. He twirls them around like he would at court, takes immense pleasure in thinking about what his father would look like watching them, giddily spins Tubbo under one of his arms.

*Probably'd have that subtle lil 'I'm really pissed off and trying not to show it' expression ya'know the one that makes him look constipated*, and Ranboo laughs mean spirited and elated, eyes easily finding Tubbo's braid nestled in his hair, little bead shining at the end, and trills at the sight, *what would he say if he knew if he knew you married a commoner that you married outside of your race*.

It's easy to imagine, *disgrace disappointment black mark*, he'd be furious, *livid*, might actually prompt him to lose that emotionless mask he wears, rattle him enough that he lets something through besides bland disinterest. Pulling Tubbo closer, Ranboo wishes for half a second he *was* back at Voidfall, just so he can rub it in his father's face how happy he is, how well he's doing, dips Tubbo for the hell of it, because he loves him, because it makes him laugh loud and bright.

It doesn't register until later, as Ranboo's sitting at a table, everyone crowded close hoarsely singing the *worst* rendition of *Happy Birthday* he's ever heard, Tubbo sliding a purple, misshapen cake in front of him, sloppy icing all over it, his name little more than looping smears on the top, that he *is* happy.

Ranboo stares at all the people gathered here, the ones that all cheer at the end of their song, wait for him to blow the candles out, none of them seeming to have realized *no one lit the candles in the first place*, and Ranboo cares for them so much, laughs so hard at their frantic scramble to *fix it* he has to prop himself up.

"Zeph, don't set the table on fire this time." Dream jokingly orders as Zephyr lines up all the candles in their sightline, wings flaring as they lean down and a wicked grin curls their lips up, voice lilting in singsong, "No promises, Dweamiel!"

They get the candles in one go, blue flames only end up melting them about halfway down, cover the entire top of the cake in colorful wax and Ranboo can't stop laughing, shakily blows them out as everyone screams at him to make a wish, and he wishes for this night not to end, for the light, soaring feeling in his chest to never fade, wants to stay transfixed in this moment for as long as possible.

Ranboo thought the cake was just dyed to mimic the ones back home, but the fork clatters out of his fingers after he's shoved a bite in his mouth, ears rocketing up as he whips to boggle at Tubbo, hastily swallows what's in his mouth, heady flavor of cloves and rich florals coating his tongue as he stammers, "W-Where in the *hell* did you get *chorus fruit*?"

Grinning around his own fork, Tubbo shrugs, swaggers up to Ranboo and hip checks him lightly, tips his head to the side and winks, "Let's just say I know a guy."

"We brought them back from Annwyl yesterday." Monto yells from across the room and Tubbo rounds on him, fork brandished like it's a blaster, "Shut the *fuck up* Monto! I'm *trying to woo my partner* by being *fucking COOL and mysterious!*"

That sets off a round of raucous laughter, and Tubbo vehemently tells everyone to *shut the fuck up* at least twice before any of them listen, but he's still grumbling under his breath as he shovels chorus cake into his mouth. Licking icing off his fork, Ranboo goes to slouch against the wall next to him, nudges his shoulder to get his attention and says lowly, "Hey I was plenty wooed, you're the best wooer of them all. *The wooiest.*"

"Oh, shut *up*." Tubbo laughs fondly, knocking into him back, and they stand all pressed against one another as they finish their cake, the party winding down since people still have missions and things to do tomorrow. Ranboo offers once to help clean up and gets shoved unceremoniously onto the couch, Ozzi clambering over the side after him, sits cross legged with their pointy as fuck knees digging into Ranboo's leg as they play soludum on their handhelds, bitching and slapping at each other in regular intervals.

"Hey, Tubbo said not to bring things but fuck him affectionately, I am my own sentient bag of bones." Ozzi declares after they've just won, *again, how the fuck are they so good at this stupid game*, fishes around in the pocket of their bomber and holds out a closed fist to Ranboo, opening it to drop a small object into his waiting hands.

It looks like a bracelet of some kind, maroon red cording wrapped around a thin piece of off white material, and Ranboo runs a claw over the intricate design, has half a thought it kinda looks like bone and then freezes *because it kinda looks like bone-*

*“Ancients of the Deep, Ozzi- t-this better not be-”*

He’s cut off by loud peals of echoing laughter, Ozzi’s jaw wagging back and forth as their eyes sputter in mirth, and their hands jump up, fingers all fanned out, *intentional smile*, *“Departed Ones- that’s amazing! But no. It’s from an animal on my planet a um...how do you say baner- binger- bhoner- doesn’t matter it doesn’t translate, ANYWAY, but yeah. We take their bones and carve jewelry from it to give to friends and family. So. There you go.”*

Now a lot less concerned, Ranboo flips the little bracelet around, picking out all the strange looping designs carved into the bone shard, wide grins of ominous looking animals, rectangles nested inside one another, hair thin lines filling up empty space. A skeletal finger wreathed in shadows pokes at his and Ranboo looks up, at the sharp angle of Ozzi’s muzzle, razor sharp fangs perpetually bared in a macabre smile, flashing eyes that’ve never looked at him with anything besides kindness, *“Happy nameday, kostka. I’d mourn for you long into the night.”*

It’s a little eerie and off putting if you don’t know them, but Ranboo thinks he understands what it means in the context of their culture, *care for you always cared for you*, sucks in a shaky breath and reaches forward to drag Ozzi into a hug, tucking his chin over their shoulder as he whispers back, *“I’d mourn for you too, Ozzi.”*

He fits the bracelet around his right wrist, likes how the maroon cord contrasts nicely with the green brocade at the end of his sleeves, settles closer to Ozzi as they go through short video clips on their handheld, Ozzi desperately trying to impart how hilarious they are on a squinting Ranboo, laughs more at his expressions than whatever’s playing.

*I am...cared for I am actually cared for this time*, eddies back and forth gently in Ranboo’s mind like the tides out in the sands as they all head back to their rooms in one big clump, people talking with him, *joking with him* like they like him, and he almost can’t believe it, that this is his life.

He thanks everyone profusely for tonight and gets many hugs in return, a jolting one from Dream that makes all his hair stand up, brief pat on the arm from George, wincing as Zephyr nearly cracks his spine in two, another from Ozzi as they bound ahead after Monto, leave him and Tubbo alone at their door with a final wave.

Their room is pleasantly dim and quiet when they stumble inside, Ranboo beyond worn out but in a wonderful way, flops down onto their bunk and grins like a doofus up at the stars on the ceiling. *“Hey.”* Tubbo calls, only warning Ranboo gets before he’s flopping down across him, the sudden weight punching all the air out of his lungs, *“Imma go like, wash my face and stuff, but wanna watch a movie before bed?”*

*“S-Sure.”* Ranboo wheezes, slapping at Tubbo who laughs as he rolls off to get his stuff together, acts like he’s dying in a bid for sympathy at least until the door swishes shut. Clicking his tongue against his teeth at how heartless his husband is, Ranboo hauls himself

up and figures he should get ready for settling down time as well, hums under his breath as he starts taking his earrings out.

He lays them in neat rows in their jewelry box, shuts the lid and sets the whole thing on the built-in shelving by his bunk, somewhere he'll have easy access to it tomorrow. Next comes the hair comb, and Ranboo pulls it out delicately, takes a second to admire how beautiful it is, fingers tracing around golden petals reverently as he sets it in its case, stores this one in his dresser because it's not really a day-to-day piece.

Today has been...absolutely unreal, the best nameday Ranboo can ever remember having, even counting those when his mother was still alive, and he presses a hand into his face, unsurprised to find a soft smile there, muscles protesting after so much use. Perhaps for the first time in his entire life, Ranboo's not really worried about tomorrow, knows he's going to wake up in his husband's arms, that they'll probably grab breakfast with *their* friends, pick a mission together, fly out in their ship and see some new corner of the galaxy.

It sounds too good to be true, and that thought sends a frightened jolt through him, but it's okay, *it's fine*, he's okay now, *yeah but for how long*, and Ranboo wets his lips, tries to remind himself not to panic, but it's bubbling up suddenly, the desperate clawing fear of *how long is this going to last how long do you have until you're back there clinging onto life waiting every second to stop breathing-*

N-No, *no*, he's fine now, *he's okay*, he got through it and he's learned some new things and he can do this, he has his husband, he has his f-friends, they'll help him, they'll keep him safe they'll-

*Lie to you know they will that's what they've always done*, and Ranboo's claws flex, paranoia flaring down his spine as he whips his head around but *no one's there he's hearing things again*, frantic inhale *because he's **hearing things** again no no no no nO NO NO NONONONO-*

*Did you really think we left? Stupid boy, you've never listened a day in your life I don't know why you would've started now*, snarling under his breath, Ranboo whips his tail back and forth, eyes narrowing as he looks for the hem of her dress, the swift line of the crop striking her palm, spits back, *you're not real. Leave me alone.*

*Of course I'm not real, I'm all in your head, just like those friendships you've dreamed up, do you honestly think any of them enjoy your company, and there, purple dress puddling onto the floor ridged line of her spine his first demon glaring down at him never good enough*, and Meleeri blinks at him slowly, lips pulling up in a sneer, *what was lesson number one, your highness? Don't you remember.*

Of course he remembers, he remembers every fucked up thing she ever taught him *all one hundred lessons drilled into his head from the time he could walk forced to stand bolt upright for hours at a time*, snaps his teeth at her and yells, *I said GO AWAY! I don't need you anymore.*

*Don't need me*, Meleeri scoffs, advances like the unstoppable sweep of storm winds, howling, shrieking power and razor thin shards of sand that slice exposed skin to ribbons, *what an*

*idiot thing to say, where would you be without me? Taken advantage of by every simpleton under the sun, ridiculed? Used? Don't be ridiculous, you need me more than you could ever possibly know.*

It sounds so inevitable coming out of her mouth that Ranboo almost buckles, bows his head in acquiescence, but then he remembers all the days he's been free, how light he's felt, startling lack of anxiety as he interacts with people, not constantly worried about being betrayed and *doesn't want to go back to the reverse*, paranoid and twitchy and *constantly looking over his shoulder*.

He's *tired of it*, knows that no one here wants to hurt him, that *he doesn't have to be like this anymore*, and Ranboo squares his shoulders, meets her searing green gaze and barks, *I do not need you, I never have, you've done nothing but poison my head and heart from the beginning, so get lost.*

Meleeri reels back, thunderous expression lighting up her features as she snaps, *I **made you** boy, never forget that* -standing there head in a daze letting *her* words and lessons pour out of his mouth watching blankly at what it does to the people around him- *I'm the one that nurtured you-* instinctual flinches that are driven out of him until absolutely nothing remains a shell of a person *of a child- I'm the one that taught you how to survive-* glancing without looking hyper aware of everything taught fear taught anxiety taught panic never safe never secure *always alone- I'm the only one that ever looked at you and yet still I hated you what does that say what does that saY ABOUT YOU JUST GO KIL-*

"Shut up!" Ranboo screams, furious fire burning under his skin, in his veins as he surges forwards, gets right up in her face and snarls savagely, "Shut up! **SHUT UP!** You didn't *make me, you fucking destroyed me!* I-I *hated myself* because of you, **BECAUSE OF ALL OF YOU!**"

*Ungrateful little heathen*, she hisses but Ranboo tosses his head to the side, voice low and rough as he growls, "Get. Out. Now."

*You can't get rid of me, you need me don't have the gall the spine wretched little thing-* and he snaps, fist flying back ready to smash through her face, but she's gone, appears wavering off to the side and he rounds on her shrieking, "I said GET OUT! I've never needed you! *Never!* All you've ever done is hurt me and taught me how to hurt others- h-how to *hate!* And I'm sick of it!"

*I kept you safe I made sure you survived I-*

"*You made sure I was alone!*" Ranboo screams, *years* of pent up anger and frustrations boiling to the surface, long, endless nights huddled in his bed thinking that's the best he was ever going to get, solitude yawning before him like the drop off the parapets, "You made sure I had *no one else* to rely on!"

*You can't trust anyone you have to know that*, and it's standing outside a study room the world dropping out from under him, it's scrabbling back and away from the person you think you love swinging fists at you, *it's the fear that everyone crowded around singing has a knife*

*hidden behind their backs*, and Ranboo swallows harsh, insistent shaking starting in his limbs and Meleeri latches her claws in and *yanks-*

*They're lying to you have to see it have to know*, smiles that don't reach as high as they should no he's imagining things don't let her get to you, *can't be this dumb can't trust them*, whispered conversations he wasn't a part of was it on purpose no no NO CALM DOWN DON'T LET HER- *can't trust anyone* -screaming anger and shaking fists red high on his face wings flared open *he hates you you think you love him- kept you safe* -long scratches gouged into his arms- *kept you alive* -sharp whistle of wind in his ears ground rushing up to meet him- *made sure you survived-* laying there waiting to die *-I made you-*

“ENOUGH!” Ranboo bellows, cutting an arm straight through Meleeri's torso, shatters her apart into dissolving shadows, barest whisper behind him and he whips around, trying to find where she's gone, “I said *enough!* Stop pretending like you *ever cared for me*. Stop acting like you *raised me!* Stop talking to *me like you never abused me!*”

*I've kept you alive-* there behind him, and Ranboo jerks around, sees her standing at the far side of the room, and it's like every memory of every lesson with her as a child hits him, standing in the center of the room with her lording over him, narrowed eyes boring into his and picking him apart at the seams and *enough he's not doing this anymore he's done this is it the end the last lesson-*

“I tried to kill myself because of you.” He seethes, taking one shaking step forwards, muscles bunching up like they're ready for an attack, “I threw myself off the palace. *Because. Of. You.* All of you. *That's* your legacy to me, *that's* the only thing you've ever done for me.”

Ranboo takes another step and it's more sure, he doesn't shake, but *she* starts to, “The only thing you ever taught me was how to be a *monster*, made me paranoid and afraid of people. But I know better than you now, and guess what? *You don't know shit.*”

Her mouth opens like she's saying something but he can't hear anything, vicious triumph rolling in his veins because she's finally quiet, *finally listening to him finally doesn't have a say*, slashes a hand through the air and wants to laugh as it cuts a vast sweep into her form, “I have a *cariad* who loves me, f-friends who *care* for me, a-a *job*, ha, me! *A job!* A-And I'm good at it! I'm smart and I'm capable and *people like me.*”

“You keep telling me you're the reason I survived, but I don't want to just survive anymore, *I want to live.*” Ranboo declares vehemently, swipes another hand through the air and does laugh this time as more of her dissolves, takes cruel delight in shredding her apart like how she's shredded him for *years, for his whole life but she doesn't control him not anymore.*

“You listen to me you- y-you stupid *bitch.*” *Ancients*, what a headrush, what simple joy and ecstasy there is standing in front of her and saying everything he's always wanted, strides forward confidently and tears the last of her out of existence, “Get the *fuck* out of my head, get the *fuck* out of my life, get the *fuck out of my memories!* I never want to *see* or *speak* to you *ever* again! Do *you* understand *me?*”

There's nothing there by the time the last word has left his mouth, and Ranboo chokes out startled laughter, pulse loud and drumming in his ears because *holy shit HOLY SHIT he did it*

*Ancients he did it she's gone she's really gone he knows he can feel it raised around the edges like a scar but she's gone hands shaking too much emotion she's gone he did it she's gone she'd gone so happy she's-*

“W-Who’re you t-talking to?”

And everything freezes over, *no no no no no*, heart dead in his chest air strangled in his lungs, *NO NO NO NO NO*, not real this isn’t real has to be another one *not real*, but when Ranboo woodenly turns to look behind him, standing in the doorway, perfectly solid and perfectly horrified, is Tubbo.

## Chapter End Notes

Ha

Lol

Anyway. Just a heads up, but I took a break after finishing so our final instalment will be a bit. Sorry in advance, but the final chapter will take a while, I do apologize and hope you come back for the thrilling conclusion to De Terra.

As always, thanks for reading!

Come scream at me on [twitter](#)!

-Hellen



# Outer Core

## Chapter Notes

Hi hello it's been a while!

Couple things up front

I split up the last chapter because it is so long. Stupid long. Seriously. So we have one more part coming. If things seem unresolved, it's because our story isn't over yet :D

Secondly, IMPORTANT TW SPECIFIC SECTIONS: Both Lessons 67 and 97 deal with mentions and depictions of suicide attempts, please skip them if that's triggering. It will not affect your readthrough.

Lastly, a gentle, lovely reminder that all tags still apply and are referenced and discussed throughout the work. If any of it is upsetting or triggering, please read with caution. De Terra deals with heavy themes and topics, but is overall, a story of healing and moving on. It's just hard to get there sometimes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His ears are ringing, feels a bit like a bomb's gone off too close and everything's rattling at the edges, vision wobbling from aftershocks and ears deafened by shrieking static.

“-kay? Ranboo, h-hey, *Boo-*”

His mouth is dry, has it always been that dry, he tries swallowing and regrets, chokes on what feels like a mound of sand, gets stuck somewhere down his windpipe and he can't breathe *he can't breathe he can't-*

“-ing to be okay, just breathe alright, I love you I-”

His head hurts his feet sway under him, eyes and nose and throat *burning* with the threat of desperate scared sobbing, claws *aching to sink into something rip and tear drag him out of this nightmare get him out get him out GET HIM OUT-*

“-alk to me *please*. I-I'm not upset, *promise*, just breathe it's gonna be okay.” But it's *not* going to be okay, *he knows he knows hE KNOWS*, and Ranboo staggers back, hands frantically raking hair out of his face, claws skating dangerously over his skin *maybe if he just maybe then it wouldn't be real if he just-*

“*Ranboo.*”

He snaps his head up, doesn't have anywhere else to look besides where Tubbo's standing at the front of the room, hands held out like he's dealing with a rabid animal. *Isn't he though one step right over the edge going to take him with you, something* whispers over his shoulder and Ranboo flinches hard, can't begin to deal with *that* right now, also can't look away from Tubbo who tracks the movement, eyes darkening like *he knows-*

*"I-I was talking to myself."* Ranboo rushes out too fast and frantic, bites his tongue hard and tries again, but he's shaking, words getting caught up and tangled as they leave his mouth, "I-I um- I-I-I- was just, u-uh, t-talking to my- mysel- i-it's *nothing*, o-okay? Okay, B-Bo, *okay*-"

"Hey, hey, Boo, *stelle*, i-it's okay, you're okay." Tubbo soothes, takes a few hesitant steps forwards but the room seems to strobe with his movement, and another image flickers over this one, Tubbo with three hands out, one behind his back and *it's there winking shining in the dim lights knife dagger syringe one hit that's all he needs one hit depress that plunger take you to the floor-*

Ranboo scrabbles backwards, feels his back hit the wall and it's like his heart punches up into his throat, pulse racing fast and dizzying, *nowhere to run nowhere to go can't breathe trapped strap you down to a medical table can't breathe grey walls grey floors padded everything straitjackets and restraints can't breathe lock you away forever can't breathe won't let them not going to you're you're-*

-having a panic attack, he's- h-he's having a *panic attack*, and now that he's aware of it, Ranboo sucks in a chattering inhale, forces it to reach his lungs, touches shaking hands to his arms, his chest, *no restraints you're fine you're just seeing things hallucinations fears not real*, lets it out and moves on from there.

The walls and floor are grey but they're warm, *not cold not harsh*, he's in his room at HQ, *their room theirs*, vibrant posters and holo-stills tacked up, *know them been there seen that see yourself smiling back its real*, neat bed with colorful nest of pillows and blankets, *helped you make it this morning while you hung off him happy nameday birthday boy hands in your hair down your back cupping your face amote Boo amote-*

Sagging over, Ranboo slides down the wall suddenly exhausted, knees shaky as he collapses on the floor, heart still going too fast but it's starting to even out, and he makes himself take deep breaths. There's a quiet shuffling sound in front of him, and Ranboo looks up, sees Tubbo sitting down as well, arms folded across his lap as he asks softly, "You okay?"

"Y-Yeah, s-sorry just um- j-just panic attack." Ranboo stammers, thuds his head back into the wall and relaxes for a fraction of a second before his brain catches up, everything rushing back in and *he remembers fuck that Tubbo knows overheard everything need to have to do damage control*, whips his head to make eye contact, "Hey, l-look it's not um, it's not what you t-think, okay?"

"Yeah... alright, o-okay, can you...c-can you explain then? Please?" Tubbo begins slowly, never takes his eyes off Ranboo but his hands are starting to fiddle with things, a sure sign of nerves from him, but of *course* he's nervous and worried.

He just came back to his husband screaming at empty air like a lunatic, but that's okay, *it's going to be okay*, Ranboo can fix this, *knows how to fix this has done it before*, adopts a sheepish look on his face and keeps his voice even as he says, "Yeah, yeah sure, um, you ever get like...into fake arguments in your head? Well, I um, I-I got a little carried away, heh, s-sorry about that I-"

But the lies die off in his throat because Tubbo doesn't look reassured, doesn't look like he buys it for a *second*, slips his eyes closed instead, bows his head and blows out a frustrated puff of air, and the anxiety starts to tick back up, hissing and whining like the beginnings of stormwind as Ranboo shakily demands, "W-What?"

Tubbo doesn't respond, eyes flicking back open to stare at the floor, and that's bad, *that's really bad always looked at you before how much longer pity in his eyes poor nutso partner*, panic driving Ranboo's voice up into something sharp and angry as he snaps, "What! *W-What*, Tubbo? What's the- w-what's your prob-!"

"Please don't lie to me." It's so quiet but it slams into Ranboo like what he imagines a high altitude fall would feel like, and it's never been more apparent than when Tubbo tips his head up, grim set to his face, *he knows he knows it's over it's done this is the end nowhere to go nowhere to hide he knows*, but even then, Ranboo can't help hanging on, can't stop himself blurting out, "I'm *not*!"

Saying something like that in the past would've set Tubbo off faster than anything, *lit match into slick puddle of fuel up he goes in flames*, but now it just makes his shoulders hunch like he's carrying the weight of the world, two hands clasped behind the back of his neck while he stares at Ranboo with tears in his eyes, "Yes, *you are*, I *know* you are. Please, *please*, don't lie to me Boo, I *know* you."

*No you don't you're an idiot don't know me don't know anything*, is on the tip of his tongue, angry and reflexive, but Ranboo clamps his teeth down until the sharp metallic tang of blood fills his mouth, *refuses* to ever speak something like that aloud again. He doesn't know *what* to say, how to get out of this one, and the silence stretches and grows in between them, big billowing clouds of dark sand on the horizon, screaming winds tearing past.

The atmosphere in their room shifts into something *stifling*, and it's so horrible to feel in a place that's always been comforting and safe, like a betrayal of the highest degree, and swallowing harshly, Tubbo looks like he braces himself for an attack, lower set of hands tangling up together in his lap, "It's okay if you...if you don't wanna talk about it right now, but...but I- I *know* okay? I...know you hear things."

For a second, everything around Ranboo winks out of existence, *no no no no NONONONO panic terror skeletons laughing at you from gutters idiot moron psychopath mounting anxiety sand hurtling past tearing into everything he knows he knows hE KNOWS HOW WAKE UP NOT REAL WAKE UP NOT REAL WAKE-*

"Y-You're- you're *wrong*! I-I *don't*!" Ranboo defends too fast and spasming, tongue sticking to everything in his mouth as he tries to force evenness into his voice, and feels his heart twist when Tubbo bows his head, tense line to his shoulders, frantically keeps going, "I-you're *wrong*, I-I'm sorry *but you're wrong*, I-I'm *not- I don't*!"

"*Ranboo*. I...it's okay, just- calm down, *breathe*, I-I'm not *attacking* you I- I'm just saying I've um...I've noticed some things *and-*"

"*You don't know anything!*" Ranboo shrieks in a panic and there's sand in his eyes and his mouth, wind howling in his ears, can't never can drown out the wild laughter of very horrible

thing in his head, *syringe in the set of hands you can't see one hit's all he needs take you to the floor take you away*, tosses his head as he yells, "You don't know *what* you're talking about! I-I! *It's not like that!* I-I don't- y-you're *wrong!* I don't I-I don't I DON'T!"

Tubbo sits bolt upright, jumping, crackling bright snarl of fire in his eyes, and it kills the words tumbling out of Ranboo's mouth as he snaps "Yes. *You do*. Do you think I'm *stupid* or something? I've seen the way you act, you're always looking over your shoulder or flicking your ears like someone's whispering to you-"

It feels like a blustering cloud of sand washes over him, freezing, rough edged little particles dragging and digging at his skin, fizzing static rolling over his mind, *no no no NO he knows he really actually knows can't do this can't do this livid fire in his eyes fists swinging at you he hates you you love him*, curls claws into his arms and wants to *get away can't nowhere to go backed up into the mirror blood on his palms no one ever wanted you-*

"-m'not an idiot Ranboo I...I- *f-fuck, ugh!* Fuck me! I just...*fuck*, h-hey, Boo, stelle, *love*, m'sorry, I- *shit*." Tubbo's voice drops off sharply, violent exhale like the roaring snap of a fire that doesn't want to be put out, forced gentleness next time he speaks, but there's still embers swirling out on each word, "I'm sorry, *I'm so sorry*, I-I shouldn't've raised my voice I- I love you, okay? A-And I'm not mad o-or disappointed or anything, okay? *Fuck*, I'm so sorry, stelle, would you look at me love, p-please?"

Ranboo can't tip his head up, terrified he's going to see color high on Tubbo's cheeks, furious way his brows are snarled together, livid line of his mouth bared in anger and he huddles into himself further, can't stop *remembering* being back *there*, *sitting small and alone while a person he cares for loves more than anything his one his only stands over him and screams that he's never been anything*.

"I'm sorry. *I-I didn't mean to*." Tubbo begs and he's on the verge of tears, Ranboo can hear it in his voice, the way it pitches and warbles, something he's gotten very accustomed to because he's usually the source of it, and he grinds his teeth together in an attempt to keep his claws out of his arms, "I just- emotions are...i-it's *so much all the time* f-for me, a-and I- it's not an excuse but I- just. *Fuck*, I'm really trying to- t-to be better but I-"

He cuts himself off with an inarticulate noise of anger, and even just that makes Ranboo's skin crawl, has cold claws of anxiety trail up and down his spine. Tubbo is a very passionate person, he loves very strongly- *hates very strongly*, and he *knows* how much Ranboo dislikes it when he raises his voice, when he shouts and snarls and loses his head *and yet he still does it anyway*.

"I don't like it when you scream at me." Ranboo mumbles into his kneecaps, arms tightening around himself when Tubbo exhales harshly, can see in his mind the way he rolls his head tensely, "I-I know, and I'm so sorry, really Boo, but I wasn't yelling *at you*."

*Does it even matter what's the difference you still did it still know how much I hate it*, and Ranboo clams up again, presses his nose into the crook of his knees and feels something warm start to creep up the back of his throat as Tubbo keeps talking, "I just- I-I care about you so much and like, I *want* to help you but you won't let me! And I...we're *partners* and I *thought that-* that'd you'd *trust me*, a-and when you don't I just...I *get so frustrated!*"

He's frustrated?

No, Ranboo's frustrated.

He's the one that's stuck in his cracked broken head not Tubbo, he's the one that has to deal with all this shit, *he's the one that feels like he's been pressed under a microscope*, the topic of conversation the source of gossip, and Ranboo's opened up, shared things, but it's *never enough*, they keep wanting more from him *and he doesn't want to give it*.

"L-Like I said though, it's not *an excuse*. I- I'm *sorry*, and I'm not judging you at all, okay? Okay, stelle? I-I...I don't know what you want me to say, 'cause I *have noticed*, Boo, b-but it's *not a bad thing* that I have." Tubbo rushes out, and that's always how it is isn't it, Ranboo's only doing the *right thing* when he's letting people peel back the layers and stare down into his winding maze, but *maybe*, there's just some things he wants to keep to *himself*-

"I-It's good actually! It um, it means I can help you better-"

He doesn't *need help*, he's *fine*, he's got this *under control* *it's no one's fucking business anyway but that's all it's been lately everyone's business everyone knowing all the time what's going on with him* and his fingers tighten over his arms.

"-a-and talking about that kinda stuff is *good*, it's part of the process and like, I'm never going to judge you okay?"

*Aren't you though, walked back in here and assumed things without me saying a word to you, and a couple things drop into place in Ranboo's mind, Tubbo always on the verge of looking like he's going to say something but biting it back she didn't tell me anything but do you need to a question he doesn't need an answer for because he thinks he knows it already has decided for himself-*

"I *want* to help you, but I can't if you *don't* talk about it." *Fuck*, and he sounds so *earnest*, little do-gooder off to save the world, *thinks he can fix you like he fixes his ship swap out the busted broken parts and replace it with something newer better*, and Ranboo feels magma bubbling up his throat, swears steam has to escape out of his mouth as he hisses, "I don't *want* to talk about it."

"Okay, t-that's fine, we don't have to talk about it now-"

"I don't *ever* want to talk about it. It's none of your business." Ranboo drags his head up, molten metals oozing out of his chest, coating everything in a tidal wave of blistering, heavy anger, "I don't know why you think it is, I don't know *why* you think I need to *talk* about *everything*."

Tubbo's face is struggling to maintain its composure, fighting valiantly at remaining neutral, but it's slipping, cracking in places, and flames wheeze out with it, "I just...think it's good for you, okay? You can't keep bottling everything up."

"Oh, so now you make decisions for me? Do I not get a say in *my* life anymore?" Ranboo seethes, lips rolling back to bare his fangs, and it drips down out of his ribs, smolders through

his sternum, the *resentment* and the *frustrations*, the *embarrassment* everyone looking at him all the time like he's one step off the deep end and he's not insane he's not crazy he's not something to feel sorry for.

Dark eyes filled with concern narrow in reproach, *stop looking at me like that I'm not something to pity I'm NOT*, and Ranboo draws himself up to his full height, *has always hated feeling weak has always hated feeling small*, muscles tensing like they're ready for a fight, "Why do you think you can decide what's best for me? Like I can't make my own choices like- I-like I-I'm *too insane* to think for myself?"

"What the fuck-? *No! I never said that!*" Oh but he's thinking it, Ranboo can tell, *who are you talking to I know you hear voices lot of mentally demanding things not sure it's a good idea*, plays back over and over again underscoring memories of Tubbo staring at him strange, weird look in his eyes Ranboo hadn't wanted to name but he knows it now, *sees it now*.

*Pity.*

*Pity pity pity pity he feels bad for you feels sorry for you looks down on you thinks less of you not a person not capable a charity case*, and there's liquid earth scorching in Ranboo's mouth, creeping through his veins like a slow, inevitable end, "You don't *have to say it*, I can tell, you think there's *s-something wrong with me*, t-that *I'm crazy, that I'm insane*, n-need to be locked up *o-or medicated-!*"

"No! Stop it! Just-! That's not *true!* Stop putting fucking words in my mouth, I-!"

But he's lying, *he's a liar*, and Ranboo flicks his ears back and there's lava rolling off his tongue as he snarls, "You feel bad for me don't you? *Pity me. The poor little insane prince*, doesn't have a-anyone or anywhere to go. Is that why you asked me to be your partner, is *that* all this has been? *Am I just a fucking charity case to-!*"

"*SHUT UP!*" Tubbo screams, embers flashing in his eyes, jerks like he's going to come flying forwards but stops dead in his tracks, claps two shaking hands on his face and holds himself agonizingly still, "*No. N-No! NO! W-We're not doing this! I- I know I shouldn't yell, I know I shouldn't be mad, but- fuck! I'm trying so Queens damn hard! A-And it's not helping that you're trying to bait me!*"

"I-I am *not!*"

"Oh shut the fuck up Ranboo, you so are." Tubbo growls from behind his hands, and just the tone of his voice stuns Ranboo into silence because he's heard Tubbo scream and rail and carry on, but he's never heard him like this, *resigned desolate furious exhausted*, like the energy its taking to feel these things isn't worth it.

This is different, it's a bitter kind of anger, the one of dark and lonely nights, freezing empty spaces beside you, gaps between your fingers and silences that stretch out long and unforgiving, and Ranboo swallows hard, queasy feeling roiling in his stomach as Tubbo finally drops his hands.

“You don’t wanna talk about it? Fine. We’re not talking about it, but don’t you *ever* try to bait me like that again.” Tubbo’s eyes are completely dead, there’s nothing in them at all as he gets to his feet, shaking in his hands as they touch at his wrists, *looking for gold bands nervous tick brink of a panic attack*, “I...I shouldn’t have pried, I shouldn’t’ve yelled, b-but you shouldn’t have tried to provoke me, I- I thought I meant more to you than that.”

Tubbo woodenly moves across to the other side of the room, starts rifling around through drawers at the edge of Ranboo’s vision, but Ranboo doesn’t turn to see what he’s doing, stares straight ahead and feels molten rock weld his mouth shut. A thousand things all clamor in his mind, indistinct chatter from skeletons barely audible past the wailing wind, and Ranboo hunches over, presses trembling fingers into his temples and *doesn’t understand what just happened*.

It’s like someone’s handed him a dozen parts that are supposed to fit together but they forgot the instructions, and he’s left to juggle them all while trying to solve this puzzle. Pieces don’t fit together right, nothing *makes sense*, and Ranboo’s getting frustrated trying to figure it-*himself*-out. He attempts to start at the beginning but it’s all jumbled, a nasty snarl of emotions Ranboo isn’t sure he can untangle, sits there and doesn’t really understand why he got so angry in the first place.

Frustrations and paranoia have been eating away at him for a while, the enormous mental strain it’s taken to admit all of the things he has weighing on Ranboo so heavily, he’s surprised he hasn’t buckled yet under the pressure. Well, maybe he has, maybe that’s what this was, but what was the *point* of riling Tubbo up, *was* he doing it on purpose, he didn’t *think* he was, he was just- *he was just scared*.

That’s not an *excuse*, it can’t be an excuse, and *fuck, Ancients, why is he like this*, why can’t he ever have a normal response to something, why does he keep hurting his loved ones, and claws prick at his arms, *need to apologize have to apologize thought I meant more to you knife through the heart your cariad your husband your friend your partner can’t do this to him-*

“I’m sorry...” Ranboo croaks into the deafening silence of their room, doesn’t receive a reply and it feels like there’s a hand wrapping around his throat, has Ranboo snapping his head up to where Tubbo’s standing by the unused bunk, “T-Tubbo? I...I’m s-sorry, okay? I um, I just-”

“I really can’t talk to you right now.” Tubbo says without looking up from his handheld, upper set of hands fiddling around with it while his lower ones are busy untangling a black wire, Ranboo realizing after a second that it’s a pair of earbuds. He can’t stop the scared noise that tumbles out of his mouth at the implication of that, *doesn’t want to hear you gonna block you out shut you away fists banging on your door somebody anybody I’m here pay attention*, and Tubbo finally looks over his shoulder.

His expression is still bleak, haggard and upset, brows drawn down low, and while his eyes do soften, it’s not in a way that calms Ranboo’s jumping pulse. “I love you, okay? And I *do* forgive you. I just...*can’t* right now. I’m...I’m afraid of what I’m going to say.” Tubbo sighs, hands stilling in their fidgeting once the cord is untangled, plugging the earbuds into his handheld with well-practiced ease, “I’ll talk to you in the morning, okay?”

And with that, he slips the earbuds in and climbs into the unused bunk, no, *no his old bunk did you forget did you forget how things used to be*, rolls over so his back is to Ranboo and must hit play because tinny, muffled music starts to filter out, quickly becomes nothing but crackling static in Ranboo's ears.

*Ancients*, why is every day like this? Why does Ranboo *always* ruin every good thing he's ever had? Things had been going *so well*, and then he had to lose every semblance of rational thought and try and pick a fight with *Tubbo*, the person who just went out of his way to throw Ranboo a wonderful party, bought him the most beautiful gift, was going to snuggle with him and watch a movie.

Creakily turning his head, Ranboo's eyes trace hesitantly over the line of Tubbo's back, sharp jut of shoulders and smooth slope of his wings, wants nothing more than to crawl in behind him and hold him close, make sure he knows he matters more to Ranboo than anyone else, but frantic pain flares out of his chest when he realizes he's not allowed that right now.

And that's completely fine, Tubbo doesn't owe him anything, everything Ranboo's been given is an enormous privilege anyway, and he forces himself to look away from Tubbo, knows he wants to be as alone as he can in their little shared dorm. *Maybe I should just go find somewhere else to sleep slip away in the night*, but that idea gets shot down pretty fast. Ranboo doesn't want to inconvenience anyone else and he *really* doesn't want to be out in public right now.

So, he stays put, stares unseeing at the wall across from him, and tries to forget who he is, maybe play pretend that he's someone else, someone who's good and kind and doesn't hurt their loved one, but none of that's true, nothing sticks, slips out of focus as quick and softly as sand off the parapets.

Ranboo doesn't know how long he sits contorted into a pretzel on the floor, but it's long enough his tailbone starts to protest and he thinks Tubbo's fallen asleep. He's been absentmindedly counting the pattern to his breathing until he realizes that might be a little weird and forces his mind to stop, gets up from the floor in a series of cracking joints and with nowhere else to go, stumbles over to their- *his bunk his again how sad how sad a thing to go from ours and we to mine and me*.

It's a small bed, Ranboo barely fits on it lengthwise, but it's never felt larger and more empty than when he pulls the blankets up, tucks pillows around himself in an effort to mimic the way he and Tubbo usually sleep all tangled together. The sheets smell like them, myrrh oil and countryside wildflowers, and Ranboo buries his face in Tubbo's pillow, knows he's not going to be sleeping tonight.

His bones ache, his skin shivers, his mind won't settle, keeps showing him the argument-fight -*whatever it was*, again and again, making him relive every agonizing moment of it, and only now can he see Tubbo was right. Ranboo *was* trying to lead him into a fight, maybe not consciously, but that horrible, nasty part of him knew all the way down at its core that an angry Tubbo was an unfocused Tubbo, and *anything* he could do to get the attention off him, he'd do it.



It wasn't just the terrified need to distract him though, it was also fueled by the slithering insecurities that find Ranboo at his lowest, most frantic points, wormed their way into his mind until it was all he could think of, *determined* to prove they were right, kept baiting Tubbo in the hopes he'd finally cave, finally give Ranboo the answers he didn't want but knew he deserved.

*Yes I think you're crazy yes I think you need to be institutionalized need medication need something anything no you can't think for yourself judgment's too impaired no I never actually liked you or wanted you just feel bad for you*, and it makes his shoulders shake, doesn't bother muffling his sobs since Tubbo has earbuds in.

Ranboo knows he's paranoid, he knows he has problems, he's crazy *not an idiot*, but fuck, it really is a whole different matter having other people know, having *Tubbo* know. *I know Boo I know you hear things*, and isn't that a punch to the gut, because Ranboo never was given the choice to tell him, *never wanted to* but that's beside the point.

It feels like he didn't have any control over the situation, honestly doesn't feel like he has much control over anything in his life, and what little agency Ranboo actually has, he hangs on to so desperately, hates feeling like something was coerced out of him even though it wasn't.

And that's what it felt like, having Tubbo come back in here and try and press the matter, and Ranboo knows somewhere in the twisting nightmare of his mind that Tubbo means well, but doesn't he understand how *difficult all of this's been?*

Ranboo's been trying so hard, *so hard*, to be better, and it's not just the attitude or psychological manipulation, it's in being more open and honest, and it scares him, *Ancients*, it scares him so bad. At no point in his life has it been a good thing to be vulnerable, at least, up until now, but he's still a little iffy on that even.

Everything hurts so much all the time, *talking* about things hurts, not talking *hurts*, *being open hurts being honest hurts being vulnerable hurts*, but not doing any of that hurts worst of all, and Ranboo is just so tired of everything. He's always known he's not good enough for Tubbo, but he liked to pretend he was, felt like maybe he got there a little these last few weeks, but Tubbo knowing about the specters and the skeletons ruins all of that.

His throat constricts harshly around a ragged cry, remembering how people in the palace used to look at him after Reshaa tried to get him institutionalized, the scorn and pity and *disgust*, curls his claws straight through the blankets and sheets as his mind swaps Tubbo into their places.

*Something wrong with you and everyone can see it it's in that eye they said he hears voices claws at the walls what's wrong with you*, a score of Tubbos turn to tell him, sneer pulling his lips back as Ranboo huddles further into himself, trying to curl up as small as possible, maybe press himself out of existence, bows his head and cries until his chest throbs.

*Everything hurts*, and it's being a child again on Annwyl, body aching from an absence of touch but it's amplified now, mind dragging out all the memories from when Ranboo had it, *hands on his back and in his hair scratching around his horns so good so nice to be held to*

*be touched to be loved*, and he whimpers, unlatches his hands and tries to comb through his hair himself.

It's not the same, *it's never been the same*, wasn't the same after mother died and does nothing now, fingers going rigid as they rake back through his hair, getting snarled up and tangled in inky strands. Ranboo buries his face in his forearms, lips curled back as he cries and hates how upset he is, keeps trying to force himself quiet but the sobbing hiccups won't stop.

He wants Tubbo, *wants him needs him so badly*, but Tubbo wanted to be alone, didn't want to deal with this right now, and that's fair, Ranboo's not begrudging him that. It's just, he's so much of Ranboo's comfort, what feels like the only safe place of refuge in the deadly dark sandstorm that swallows his mind, but he asked to be left alone and Ranboo will never deny him what he wants, even if it feels like his sternum is cracking in two.

The bed dips at his back then, and for a second, Ranboo thinks it's all in his head, but he knows he can't ever recreate the feeling of that heat bleeding back through him, can never get the cadence of *that* voice right, "Oh Boo...oh amor, I'm so sorry, v'qui amor, v'qui."

Hands smooth down over his arms, card through his hair, brush against his own tangled messily in dark locks, and a sob bursts out of Ranboo's chest, clicking catching roughly over stuttering exhales that only get worse and more erratic as Tubbo settles behind him. Ranboo bites his lip in an attempt to keep it down, but then a set of arms are snaking around his waist, dragging him closer and he lets it go with a pathetic keen.

"*Tesoro, corde il mia splendose*, amor, m'sorry, *Queens, m'dispiace*- don' cry starlight, sorry, so sorry for leavin' you." Tubbo mumbles into the back of his neck, so impossibly tender and caring, and Ranboo shakes his head frantically, tries to worm away even though it kills him, "N-No- *n-no*, I-I'm s- sorry, I-I- did I um, *w-was I making too m-much noise?* S-Sorry, s-sorry, so *s-sorry*-"

"Don't cry, melli, don't cry. I'm right here, stelledore, shouldn't've left you, m'sorry." Tubbo hushes and it's too much, all the things he's whispering low and sweet in Apian, *darling honey love starlight*, Ranboo can't take it, cries needy and desperate like a lost child, *little lonely forgotten thing*, hiccups as arms squeeze him tight.

"M'sorry, *m'sorry!* S-Sorry for bein- being *mean t-to you*, sorry f-for *h-hurting you!*" Ranboo chokes out, sniffs hard and hates loves *needs* the way Tubbo holds him, never wants Tubbo to leave *knows he probably should that you doesn't deserve it*, wishes for once in his void cursed life that things would make sense in his head, "I-I'm so h-horrible to *you, s-sorry Bo, s-sorry h-heulwen*- sorry, m'so *s-sorry-!*"

"You're not 'orrible, melli. M'know you're sorry, Boo, *m'know okay?*" Tubbo says against the back of his neck, deep, heavy sigh that ruffles Ranboo's hair, tip of a nose pressed into his hairline, "Said I forgive you, and *I do*, so don' cry, amor, s'okay, *you're okay.*"

But no matter how many times Tubbo murmurs it, whispers sweet words into the space between them, Ranboo can't get his breathing under control, shakes and hiccups and rattles

with sobs he *does* attempt to muffle now, pathetically leans into Tubbo's touch like he knows he shouldn't.

*Wanted to be alone and you drug him over here with your pity party manipulative coercive snake what a monster I raised,* and Ranboo sees a flickering of stern green eyes, clamps his own shut and forces his breathing even, *not now not now if you ever cared for me not now,* murmurs ragged and without much thought, "W-Why do you love me?"

"Why do'ya love me?" Tubbo mumbles back, sounding like he's half asleep as is, but a hand wiggles up to rest over where Ranboo's heart beats, the warmth of that palm making his pulse pick up sharply, "M'know I'm not easy to love...I-I have a temper, Imma *bitch*, clingy, needy...ov'rly sensitive..."

"You are *none* of those things...n-nothing in life is e-easier than *loving you*." Ranboo stresses, brings a hand up to thread shaking fingers through the one Tubbo has splayed out over his heart, can feel it beating erratically under his fingertips, "I...I-I know I don't make your life easy and...a-and I'm *so s-sorry*. I just...I'm such a *mess*."

Tubbo blows out a big gust of air, squeezes their fingers together as he shuffles closer, tangles their legs up and breathes exhausted on the edge of sleep, "Ranboo...so'm *I*."

He falls asleep before Ranboo can come up with anything to say, fingers slackening, and slowly, carefully, Ranboo detangles their hands, lets Tubbo's fall gently to rest against the mattress. *What are we going to do with each other,* he thinks, blinking bleary eyes open to stare at a blank expanse of grey wall, sweltering heat at his back, *I keep hurting you and you keep hurting me are we ever going to get past it will there ever be a time it's not like this.*

And sleep doesn't find Ranboo that night, only thing that comes to him restless thoughts and the fear that everything has to end, wonders fatalistically and intrusive how long *forever* actually is, if *I love you no matter what* covers hearing voices and violent outbursts, can't sleep because his mind won't let him, because he doesn't know the answer.

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### **Lesson Forty-One: Duty comes before attachments ~~is that why he never looks at you~~**

"Hi mama, how're you? I hope you're doing well. I'm good! I played hide and seek with Tay and Ett yesterday but I don't really think they know how to play because um, b-because they took a really, *r-really* long time to find me." Ranboo laughs a little, fidgeting side to side where he sits criss-crossed in front of mama's stone, massive drift of flowers making his nose itch.

He rubs at it quickly and impulsively, flinches expecting a sharp crack or reprimand to follow, but he's alone out here in the memory garden, nothing but the quiet clinking of hollowed stone chimes echoing mournfully in the early morning light. Smoothing hands down his arms, Ranboo takes a small sip of air and ignores the slight shake in his hands, looks for something else to talk about, and bounces up and down a little when he thinks of something.

“I’m supposed to start instructionals soon!” He says excited, and for a minute, gets swept up in the elated prospect of learning new things, is *so* ready to hear more about the galaxy spread out above him, but then he remembers what Meleeri said in their last lesson and his ears droop, “B-But governess says I won’t be allowed i-if I can’t read my lesson books okay.”

A soft breeze flutters the shorter parts of his hair, chimes clink and rattle in the background, and tapping his fingers together and apart, Ranboo bows his head, admitting shamefully to his lap, “I-I’m having trouble r-reading again, mama. I-I know h-how hard you worked to help b-but...but I...I don’ know. M’sorry...I’m really trying, i-it’s just...not w-working...”

The only answer he gets is the gentle and eerie sounds of the chimes ringing into one another, twists his fingers together until they hurt a little and snuffles harshly, desperately wanting to feel a hand comb through his hair right now. “I miss you.” Ranboo whispers like he’s whispered every day for these last few months, keeps his head bowed so he doesn’t have to see the looming stone in front of him, “I...i-it’s not the s-same without you, m-mama, I- e-everyone is s-so *busy* a-and I- um, I-I-”

*Stop stuttering it is unbecoming of someone with your bloodline*, the memory of Meleeri barks at him and even though it’s just in his head, Ranboo still flinches, curling in on himself, claws digging into his skin as his shoulders shake, “*S-Sorry-! S-S- I- I just m-miss you s-so mu-much*, a-and I k-know you c-couldn’t st-stay but *mama why! W-Why did y-you le-leave m-me?*”

His voice breaks off harshly in a loud wail, and Ranboo folds into himself, presses his forehead into his knees and sobs, back heaving with the force of his cries. Everything *hurts*, *everything’s hurt for so long*, and his tail curls around his legs, arms overtop it, every limb hanging on to him for dear life like he’s lost in the violent tides of the sand seas.

Ranboo doesn’t have a name for it, doesn’t understand it, but there’s this dark, sucking, *gaping hole in his chest*, and it keeps threatening to drag him in, greys out the world around him in blurry static and he’s scared, he’s so scared of falling in and never getting back out. Breath stuttering wild and out of control, he tries to actually get air into his lungs but it never seems like it reaches, leaves him light headed and a little dizzy, makes it so Ranboo misses the shoes crunching on gravel behind him.

He jolts at the light touch on his head though, snaps his gaze up and blinks stupidly for a second, scrambling to his feet as soon as he can and cuts a horribly sloppy bow, words falling out of his mouth in a jumbled mess, “I- h- fath- h-hello- *um*, ah, g-greet- greetings *h-honored f-father I-I-I- u-um I-*”

“What are you doing out here? It’s barely daybreak.” Father says, and Ranboo winces as he straightens back up, twists his feet closer together and answers hesitantly, “I- um, I-I couldn’t sleep.”

“That’s not an excuse, you shouldn’t be wandering the grounds unsupervised.” Father’s voice is always even and level, no matter if he’s upset or not, but Ranboo can *see* the disappointment in his eyes, jerks his own down and feels that *pit* reeling him in slowly.

“Yes sir.” He hushes to the ground, incessant tugging under his ribs, crackling static at the edges of his vision and Ranboo’s throat bobs as he swallows roughly, can’t get rid of the feeling he’s got something stuck down there. It’s dreadfully quiet while he waits to be dismissed, for father to sigh and wave his hand, deep voice intoning, *back to your chambers immediately*, so Ranboo is more than a little surprised when he hears gravel crunching and sees a dark shape kneeling down in front of him.

Peeking up cautiously, Ranboo blinks and lifts his head the rest of the way, stares back at father looking at him. His eyes are darting all around Ranboo’s face like he’s looking for something, bright, livid green of them a stark contrast to the dark circles underneath, and hesitantly, Ranboo smiles at him a little. Father doesn’t smile back, which isn’t unusual, Ranboo’s not sure he’s ever seen him smile, but he brings a hand up, Ranboo hardly daring to breathe as fingers touch at his cheek.

“Have you been sleeping at all?” Father murmurs softly, thumb touching lightly right under one of Ranboo’s eyes, and Ranboo really doesn’t know what to say. He knows he’s not supposed to lie to father, but he also doesn’t want to disappoint him by telling me that, no, he hasn’t been, not really, and he stands there in indecision long enough it might as well be an answer.

But instead of any scolding reprimand, father only sighs, tips his hand and cups Ranboo’s face gently, claws carding through the hair at the back of his head. Ranboo leans back into his touch so hard he almost falls backwards, but then there’s another large palm wrapping around his shoulder to keep him upright, and he sobs at the feeling.

“Hush little one, you can’t cry, not now, not ever. You’re a *prince*.” Father chides, hand on his shoulder squeezing to punctuate the statement, fingers still dragging slowly through Ranboo’s hair, the most he’s ever touched Ranboo for as far back as he can remember.

Nodding his head jerkily, Ranboo tries to calm down, but it’s like somethings sprung a leak and he can’t stop it. Heavy, exhausted things race through his skin and prick up his spine, settle horrible around his heart, only has him crying harder. He’s nudged forward gently, but the unexpectedness of it makes Ranboo trip, and he practically falls into father’s chest, is going to stumble back *immediately* but arms go around him to pull him closer.

There’s some shuffling and rearranging of limbs, but Ranboo finds himself curled up in father’s lap, head nestled in the crook of his arm, cheek resting against his chest, the unfamiliarity of the gesture enough to stun the sobs into silence. Looking up at him slowly, Ranboo tries to keep as still as possible, afraid he’ll ruin the moment, *this precious connection*, with one wrong move.

Father doesn’t have his crown on, doesn’t really have anything to show his station, and it’s unsettling, makes Ranboo feel like he’s intruding, because like this, father doesn’t look like a king he looks...he looks *tired*, dark smudges under his eyes that Ranboo’s started noticing under his own. Something about that realization gives Ranboo enough courage to dare raise a hand, settles his trembling palm on father’s face, slides it up and pats carefully under one of his eyes.

“You need to sleep too.” Ranboo whispers and then quickly drops his hand, curls both of them up together over his chest, and it’s not really a smile, could never be called that, little more than a twitch of the lips as father sighs, “There’s no rest for men like me, Ran.”

“Men like you?” Ranboo questions, but father shakes his head, breaks eye contact to look up at mama’s stone, and it’s only when he speaks next that Ranboo realizes somethings gone out of his voice, “Sleep if you can, I’ll be here for a little while longer yet.”

“Okay...” Ranboo mumbles petulantly, really wanting an answer to his question but he settles out of obligation, doesn’t think he’s actually going to sleep until a hand comes up and starts carding through his hair, and he sags back bonelessly. It’s been so long since he’s been touched like this, Ranboo can’t stop the way trills and purrs and affectionate noises clatter and catch in his chest, rubs his cheek into father’s side.

And just barely, faintly, he can hear the quietest whisper of the deepest rumbling, like the low bass thrum of ship engines kicking on, and it lulls him off to sleep, sends Ranboo drifting down through layers of tingly warm sand, and it must be his imagination, trick of the ears right before he succumbs, but the rumbling starts to trip and snag weird, almost sounds like crying.

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Squinting through the binoculars, Ranboo fidgets around with their settings, brings the penthouse into clearer view, slowly sweeps them back and forth and tries to figure out a good point of entry. *Alarm system is a Ventron complete coverage plan meaning doors and windows are all bugged, less than ideal, breaking in last resort*, Ranboo nibbles on his lower lip, flicks a few more settings and eyes the sleek refined lines of the building, *upscale place could pose as repairmen to gain entrance they likely wouldn’t notice we’re not the regular team run the risk of being asked for ID maybe need forged copies fucking of course just one more thing*.

He lowers the binoculars for a second and rubs fingers into his aching temples, really, *really* wants this mission to be over already. Things just keep coming up, and it’s gone on days longer than either one of them was expecting as they tried to track down an obscure auction house item, pinging ponging between upscale condos and swanky penthouses looking for the stupid thing.

Whatever it is, some *hideous* carved statue or something, is apparently a very hot commodity with the elite, has changed hands about fifteen times in the last month alone on the black market, and while it is butt-ass ugly, it has *extreme* cultural significance to an ethnic group in the local system. That’s really the whole reason they’re here, the pay is ass and even before this nonsense began, Ranboo thought it sounded boring and tedious, but one look at the hard set to Tubbo’s face and he knew they were taking it.

*He’s too noble for his own damn good*, Ranboo thinks with a glower, sets the binoculars to the side for a second and folds his arms on the edge of the building, can see Tubbo out of the corner of his eye slouched against the low wall messing with his handheld. He was *supposed* to be looking for building schematics, but that’s clearly the chat log open on his screen, and

Ranboo rolls his eyes with a huff, figures if Tubbo can take a break to text Tommy, *he* can get a few minutes to not think.

In the dark of the night, Iziya glows like a beacon, narrow winding streets congested with a thousand neon signs and shops that spill out into the road, rough cacophony of voices and motors revving that drifts up even to where they're staked out. Ranboo mindlessly watches the sluggish crowd move, people pushing past one another in something like a drunken stumble, and his mind whites out with static as he drifts for a second.

He hasn't been sleeping much recently, and his body's not appreciating the sharp jerk back into insomnia, plagues him with migraines and wandering thoughts as he struggles to readjust to being sleep deprived. Iziya's climate is on the warmer end too, and even in only a t-shirt, bomber slung around his waist, Ranboo's encroaching on uncomfortably hot, finds himself nodding off a bit.

He's in that weird place of being awake but not aware, kinda asleep and yet not, spinning muzzily through slow syrupy thoughts, struggling to keep his head upright when an exhaust pipe a street or two over backfires and he jerks awake sharply. The initial loud crack is followed by a gurgling mechanical drone, and Ranboo's ears flick quickly at the unpleasant noise, has always hated the sound of improperly tuned motorbikes, lips pulling back in a sneer as it fades from earshot.

A prickle races down his spine then, and even though he hasn't lived in Voidfall for a few months now, Ranboo's learned that some things just won't leave him, and the deep seated paranoia and awareness is one of them, knows without having to see that he's being watched. Cutting his eyes to the side, Ranboo just barely catches Tubbo whipping his head back down to his handheld, trying to act like he wasn't staring and something unpleasant turns over in Ranboo's chest.

"What?" He asks maybe a bit harsher than he should, straightening up as Tubbo shrugs, lower lip sticking out a little while he shakes the hair from his eyes, says way too nonchalant for Ranboo's liking, "Huh? Nothing."

*"What."* Ranboo demands again, eyes narrowing, mind kicking into overdrive trying to figure out what's going on in Tubbo's head, *what that look was for*, combing back through the last few minutes obsessively, *binoculars and boredom and so tired can't keep your head up drifting away exhaust pipe sudden jerk ears flicking automatically know you hear things ears flick someone whispering to you*, and it clicks into place and his claws shriek against smooth stone.

"I *thought* you weren't going to *assume things*." Ranboo hisses, drawing himself up to his full height, shoulders squared, feet set like he's bracing for an attack, and Tubbo doesn't move besides cutting his eyes up, voice completely dead as he says, "And I thought *you* didn't wanna talk about it."

And *he's right*, but Ranboo's not in the mood to agree with him right now, feels like he'd be proving some dumb point Tubbo's trying to make, turns away snippily and glares out over the city. It doesn't hold as much whimsy as it did a few minutes ago, and now, all the lights grate at his eyes, air miserable and stuffy to breathe.

His head hurts, his eyes itch, he's tired and hot and frustrated and *wants to go the fuck home*.

*And where exactly is that*, a deep voice curls and Ranboo fights the urge to claw his eyes out, hangs his head and ticks his jaw back and forth, ignoring both of the figures on his left, one real one not- *you've shunned the entire place you were born, exiled yourself to endless wandering, but where exactly do you think you're going to go?*

*Fuck off go away I can't stand you-*

*It's not back to your headquarters, can't face more tense nights of tossing and turning, him crawling into your bed like it's an obligation and then out of it like it's a relief*, it feels like magma drips down the back of his throat, swears smoke should shoot from his nose with how furious he exhales, knows that *he's wrong and a bastard*, that Tubbo getting out of their bed in the middle of the night is only because of this stupid bout of insomnia, *it's nothing else it isn't-*

*It's not back to Apidae, a place you are only welcome when he invites you there and with the way things are going, that's not lasting much longer*, father muses in a bored tone, like he already knows the outcome, *like he holds all the cards pulls all the strings the unbeatable opponent*, but he *doesn't know shit*, they're fine, *they're going to be fine*, Ranboo just...needs to figure out a way to convince Tubbo he's exaggerated the problem without manipulating him in the process.

And he's working on it okay, but it's a tricky thing, because Tubbo has more or less full on decided that Ranboo hears voices, and he's *not wrong and that's the biggest fucking issue*.

*If you could fuck back off to whatever pit you crawled out of I'd appreciate it*, Ranboo thinks as hard as he can, imagines hauling father around by his shoulders and shoving him into a dark room, slams the door on his impassive face and with a flick of the wrist, chains rattle over it, sealing him away.

Ranboo knows that's not going to do anything really, the fucker will be back like he always is, but it's a quick patch for now, can hopefully get him through the next few hours, maybe finally land him on a solution to this problem.

"You can't keep avoiding this forever...you gotta face it at some point." Tubbo mutters irritated like *he knows*, and calling this a problem might be an understatement actually, *colossal disaster*, is probably more appropriate, because Tubbo can't be coaxed or cajoled into dropping the matter.

He's too smart to fall for Ranboo's bullshit lies and excuses, too noble to leave this thing be, cares about Ranboo too damn much to be convinced into letting it go. If he was anyone else, if he gave *fractionally* less of a shit, Ranboo could probably spin this whole thing easily and get out of it, but he's *not* and it's driving him insane.

"I'm not avoiding anything...I *told you*, I have this under control." Ranboo snaps, glaring out over the city, and this is *his* problem, he's never told another soul and he'd never planned on it, but it's out of his hands now and he's furious. Tubbo scoffs and Ranboo whips to glower at



him, ears pinned back close to his head as Tubbo huffs, “Then what about Rascheska? The bar? Is *that* what you call having this *under control*?”

“No. T-That had *nothing to do w-with- with-*” Ranboo cuts himself off with a frustrated exhale, tail whipping behind him, remembers blinding anger and a hand on Tubbo’s shoulder *far from the hive aren’t you*, and shivers breakout across his skin, voice dipping low, “Those shitheads had it *coming*.”

“Ranboo you nearly killed a man with your *bare hands*.”

*And your point*, Ranboo almost asks, wouldn’t regret it except for the way it made Tubbo stare at him, *terrified scared who are you*, and he can see a shadow of that now in his eyes. There’s something peculiar about that look, it reminds him of the palace, of Reshaa sneering at him from across the table and *you should know not to mess with my things little brother*, it’s worrying, it feels like points connecting.

It’s too many doctor’s appointments, coached questions that are only really looking for one answer, waking up groggy and confused aching spot on his arm where the syringe went in, eyes staring after him whispers at his back, *didn’t you hear something wrong hears things what do they tell him claw marks on the walls violent outbursts dangerous how much longer*, and his eyes go wide.

“Fucking-! *Ancients of the Deep Void Below!*” Ranboo yells, *unstable unpredictable written in neat block letters recommended institutionalization for safety reasons claws punching through the file*, flings both his hands out and snarls, “I don’t *fucking* hear *voices telling me to hurt people!* I- Fuck you! Why the fuck would you think that?”

“I didn’t say that! I...I-I don’t know, okay?” Tubbo shouts back, tossing his handheld down out of exasperation, rakes a set of hands through his hair and throws the others around, “I just...I-I read some stuff online and like- I don’t know! You won’t tell me anything a-and I just- look this is hard okay?”

“Oh this is *hard for you*?” Ranboo seethes and Tubbo snaps his mouth shut with an audible click, embarrassed flush on his face, and good, he should be embarrassed, he’s *acting like a tool*. And the last thing Ranboo wants to do is talk about any of this, but he’d rather sacrifice some pride and dignity rather than letting Tubbo continue on thinking he has *fucking- cliché demon voices* in his head whispering at him to murder.

“Okay first off, *they don’t tell me to kill people*.” Ranboo snaps, doesn’t add on the, *they only tell me to kill myself*, which he figures wouldn’t do well for his whole ‘*I am mentally stable*’ campaign, “Secondly. It’s none of your damn business, but you keep acting like it is, and I’m fucking sick of it.”

“I just-” Tubbo starts, but Ranboo doesn’t care what he has to say at the moment, bulldozes over him, “I don’t know how many more times I can tell you this doesn’t concern you. You keep...*sticking your nose* into it, and this is the *exact* reason I never wanted you to find out in the first fucking place.”

Tubbo recoils hearing that, hands gripping tight at his biceps, something off about his voice when he murmurs, “Y-You...you weren’t gonna tell me?”

“Of course not!” Ranboo yells like it should be obvious, doesn’t think anything of it, but then he sees the way Tubbo’s entire expression cracks open raw and vulnerable. He is one of the most expressive people Ranboo has ever met, and it’s like reading a book, seeing the way his feelings flash across his face and he’s hurt, he’s so hurt right now.

Trust is very important to Tubbo, and it’s understandable why he’s so desperate to make sure he can trust the people in his life, *Tommy who wouldn’t go with him never explained why Wilbur who lied to him and used him*, but Ranboo’s started to learn *he needs it to go both ways*.

It’s not enough that he can trust Ranboo, *Ranboo also needs to trust him*, and he does! He trusts Tubbo entirely with his life, but just...some things are private, there’s *too much* openness and honesty, but Tubbo doesn’t do things in half measures, he wants everything.

And the thought makes Ranboo dizzy, has never shared a fraction as much as he’s shared with Tubbo, and the thought of saying more, *going deeper*, makes him want to claw his skin off, and that’s not normal, it shouldn’t be that way. There has to be a compromise, there has to be *something* he can do, a middle ground they can meet at because Tubbo has got to learn he can’t have *everything*.

“I do trust you.” Ranboo says in a much gentler tone, slides down the low wall he’s been leaning against so they’re more at eye level, so he’s not standing over Tubbo like a drill sergeant, “I...t-this has been really hard for me, do you get that?”

“Yes.” Tubbo murmurs dead, fingers flexing around his arms, and it’s harder to read his side profile, but it’s clear he’s upset. Panic and worry start to ease to life in Ranboo’s chest because *he did that*, he put that there, but the thought of explaining the specters to Tubbo scares him more than anything, scares him more than sitting in the dark rattling cargo hold of the Raider’s ship ever did.

“I’ve kept so much t-to myself for s-so long I...thinking about e-everything I’ve told you makes me want to throw up.” Ranboo admits with a nervous laugh, and he swallows harshly when Tubbo doesn’t respond, fingers tapping together and apart, “L-Like I said I do um, d-do trust you I- I just get so scared a-about you knowing things, about um, a-about *me*. D-Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” But there’s nothing in his voice and Ranboo’s hands stutter, fingers winding together instead now to conceal it, “O-Okay um, yeah I just...I-I-I don’t know I- there’s just uh, just some um, some things I-I don’t t-think I’ll be able to talk about- *with you*, e-ever, and um...i-is that okay? Is that o-okay with you?”

“Yes.” Tubbo says but his voice catches weird, sounds like he was going to say something else but stopped himself short, and ever one of the worst things to exist, Ranboo’s mind fills in that blank space with a little too much glee. *Sir yes sir he was going to say yes sir head bowed in salute sir yes sir with a hundred others made him feel small and weak and worthless*, and his mouth goes dry in a horrible wave of guilt.

Ranboo has the sudden urge to flee, mind tearing itself in two because he *wants to needs to has to* make Tubbo happy and that means being open, but then the other half feels like it's jumping off the side of Voidfall, tripping erratically through thin air, *can't won't never will* utter a single word more.

He doesn't know what to do, *he doesn't know what to do*, and Ranboo staggers to his feet, wants to escape from this, *from himself*, core already freezing over in preparation to teleport, but then he thinks about leaving Tubbo here alone and stops. *All hunched over into himself knobby knees pulled up arms wrapped tight is it a head of dark brown hair and antennae bowed or is it inky dark locks and horns*, and he wants to move so badly, but he won't, he'll stay if Tubbo needs him to.

"H-Hey I- I-I need a second, but um, b-but I'll stay if you need. Promise, heulwen." Ranboo wrings his hands together and shifts nervously on the balls of his feet, bright crackle of energy thrumming under his chest, coordinates in mind, all he has to do is slip through reality, but he'll wait, he'll stay *promised promised he'd stay-*

"Go ahead...I...I-I need a second too." Tubbo stammers, rakes a set of hands back through his hair to clasp behind his head, and that's all the dismissal Ranboo needed, the rooftop fading out around him as he wiggles his way between the folds of this dimension.

He comes stumbling out in a dingy back alley at the foot of the building they were camped on, stuffs his shaking hands in his pants pockets and slouches into the main stream of foot traffic. Ranboo weaves his way around throngs of people, and there's so many lights and sounds and conversations happening his brain doesn't know what to latch on to, drifts fizzy and lost, and finally, he breathes a sigh of relief.

Thinking all the time is exhausting, but Ranboo doesn't know how to get his mind to stop, only thing that has ever worked is slightly overloading it with sensory input, so it'll short out more or less. That's not normal, but then again nothing much about him really is, and it's getting to the point where Ranboo feels like he's going to have to give up on that dream of chasing normalcy.

Someone bumps into him in the crowd and that makes him jump, a voice calls out excited but too loud and he flinches, quickly steps out of the flow of traffic and slumps against the side of a storefront, can only calm down when his back is pressed into a solid surface. Ranboo watches people buzz past, *grinning smiling laughing*, indigo flush on their powder blue faces, looks like they don't have a care in the world as they're jostled or when someone shouts, wonders what it's like not to be so paranoid and high strung all the time.

Maybe if he wasn't the way he is, Tubbo wouldn't be so miserable, would feel like he had the trust and love of his partner unconditionally, but as it stands, Ranboo can't provide that for him. His claws bite into his arms reflexively at the thought and he forces himself to unwind, thuds his head back into the wall and wishes he was anyone but himself.

*Promised he'd never leave but it's only been a few months does he really want a lifetime of this*, Ranboo thinks, staring unseeing out at the crowd, and assuming they don't get themselves killed at an early age, that'd be like *seventy years* or something. That is more time

than either one of them has been alive combined, it's over *half* a century, and imagine that, *half a century*, trapped with *Ranboo* as your partner.

No one sane would agree to that, void, *Ranboo's* not sure even he'd agree to that and he's the one stuck with himself permanently, has only been alive twenty one years and with how exhausted he is, he's honestly not sure he's even going to survive twenty one more if it's always like this.

It's not like *Ranboo* doesn't want things to get better, and he can admit that some things have, like he hasn't wanted to throw himself off anything in around a month now, but there's other stuff he's just not sure is *going to* get better. The specters are his own damn fault, *Ranboo* wished them into being and relied too much on them, gave over too much of himself, and now it feels like they're as much a part of him as anything else.

He hasn't heard anything that sounds like *Meleeri* since his nameday, but it seems too easy, too convenient that she's gone all of a sudden. *Ranboo* doesn't know if it's just wishful thinking or not, is scared to put too much hope into it, only to wind up disappointed when she slithers back out of wherever she's gone. If it was a perfect galaxy, he wouldn't have had to dream them up in the first place, and if *Ranboo* really had a say, he'd want them gone in a heartbeat, but the problem is, he doesn't think there really is a *way* to get rid of them.

When *Reshaa* was trying to get him admitted, she had *Ranboo* drug in front of every senior medical staff the palace housed, and most of them were in her back pocket so they never listened, but even the ones that weren't turned a deaf ear to him. *Ranboo* tried explaining in the beginning, *just imaginary friends nothing more they don't tell me things I don't already know*, but once it became clear no one was listening, *had already made their assumptions*, he back peddled hard trying to do damage control.

They never helped, told him to sleep more, to eat regularly and work on making real friends, and when *none* of that worked, *why would it he couldn't sleep he ate when he was supposed to he couldn't trust anyone*, they handed him small bottle after small bottle. *You'll feel better just take it*, bored voices tell him as he's ushered away, and it's staring at the little fleet of plastic containers he's accumulated and remembering, *luridly green eyes hazed over drunken swing of her head stop LOOKING AT ME-* sweeps the whole mess into a trash bin without a second thought.

Doctors make him nervous, *anyone* observing too closely makes him nervous, feels like a hand is cinching closed around his throat, *stinging prick of a syringe makes you pliant drops you to the floor*, and *Ranboo* rolls his head trying to dislodge the feeling. His anxiety is flaring sharply thinking about all of this, and he cracks each knuckle one at a time, working down the rows of his fingers, trying to find something to distract his mind with.

The street in front of him is still really crowded, *Iziya* has a popular nightlife scene and this section of town will probably stay busy until the early hours of morning, making it good for people watching. *Ranboo* mindlessly scans the crowd, ears flicking trying to pick out words of the local language, and he's skirting the edges of a panic attack, so that *has to be why* he thinks he hears *that* laugh, the one that steals the air from his lungs and freezes his blood solid.

He snaps to attention immediately, tail gone stock still behind him afraid to twitch even the slightest, *hands wrapped tight around it yanking you back yanking you down and you yowl on impulse swallow it back when they laugh when he-*

There, *again*, the sound that haunts his nightmares, and Ranboo tries to breathe normally, knows he's hallucinating, but every inhale rattles as he whips his head, looking frantically across the sea of people. Another image pulsates over reality in time to his stuttering heart and it's not real, *it's not* but it's-

*-drab walls and cracked concrete under his feet stained black hastily wipe it up but it smears everywhere freezing burn running down his face scorching tip of a knife at his throat languorously drawing shapes while he screams scared songbird and that voice laughs and laughs and laughs-*

Ranboo steps out into the street in a trance, *hands forcing him down boot crashing into his horns sick crack as one cleaves off*, slowly pushing his way through the horde of people, walking *towards* the ugly grating hateful laughter, it's not in his head, *searing fire burning into his skin draws lines he sees everyday threatening at his fingertips next*, a group looks like they've just come stumbling out of a bar, an insignia Ranboo is never ever going to forget emblazoned on their sleeves, *prick at the crook of his elbow terror choking him this time instead of hands behave for us birdie-*

His blaster is in his hands, *when did it get there head snapping to the side as he's backhanded*, finger not hesitating on the trigger depressing it like, *that syringe into your arm never been so scared as when you felt your mind slipping away last thought no one's coming*, but he's shaking horribly, his shot goes wide, *scared songbird*, smashing through a nearby window instead.

The group of Raiders spin around looking for *who what where*, and there, *AND THERE*, crooked nose slanted red eyes scar through his lip, and Ranboo can't forget anything but there is no instance where he'd *ever forget that face*, can't breathe, fires again, *misses again* and screams in frustration anger *terror hands around your throat blood down your face sing for me-*

Ranboo's off like a shot, shoving through the crowd like his life depends on it, and his chest is on fire, too many things burning wild and out of control, but he has a target this time, *he has a target this time and a blaster in his hands and sharp claws and fangs and there's going to be a corpse at his feet if he can just get there.*

They have to be drunk, go tripping back from him in confusion, a fist swings at his head but it's sloppy, Ranboo ducks, comes twisting back up and cracks his knuckles into that one's face, hits hard enough something crunches under the impact. Someone's screaming, several someones, he doesn't know, it might be him, *he doesn't care*, hears a blaster whine and is gone the next second, appears behind a figure that's trying to turn in alarm but never makes it, drops to the ground with a smoking crater in their face.

But it's not the one he wants, *it's not HIM the nightmare the demon sing for me*, and Ranboo whips around and it's like a magnetic pull, his eyes snapping to the ones as red as the

seething remnants of a supernova, *concrete slicked with your blood head growing heavy can't throw off the hand petting through your hair good boy-*

Ranboo lunges forwards howling, blood on his face *it's not his*, blaster in his hands *he has a target*, hellfire in his eyes *he sees a corpse*, and the two remaining Raiders turn and flee. People are everywhere, Ranboo can't *see*, finds a low hanging roof and the next thing he knows he's vaulting over the side of it, crashing down onto the nightmare, feet driving into his spine harshly as he takes the two of them to the ground.

They roll across asphalt, and Ranboo's above him for a second, arm swinging back to aim properly, but then there's knees in his gut and he goes flying back, scraping his palms in his haste to get his legs under him. "Ranboo!" Someone's screaming for him and it's getting closer, echoing above his head, but the nightmare just scrambled down a side street and Ranboo's rocketing to his feet to chase after.

*Not getting away can't run from this from me right between the eyes sharpshot no hesitation your blood under my boots your screams in my ears and that's a promise*

It's dark back here, Ranboo can see but *he* must not be able to, trips into a few trash bins and it's enough, *it's enough*, slows him enough that Ranboo can catch up, can grab him around the shoulder, spin him so they're facing and smash the hilt of his blaster across his face.

A dark purple line splits open over his already crooked nose, violet running down his face as he grunts in pain, *hands around your throat voice cutting out needle in your arm can't remember anything after what happened WHAT HAPPENED*, and Ranboo rears back with a feral shriek, punches him again and *again and again*, until his blaster is slick with purple blood, whips him across the face so hard he loses his grip, sends the bastard crashing to the ground.

*Kneeling on the dingy floor face throbbing while they bind your hands your ankles shakily ask if they need the comm number again horrible laughter terrible laughter hand fistings in your hair oh I think we're gonna have some fun first birdie-*

The Raider's propping himself up on elbows but freezes when he sees the glowing end of a blaster pointed in his face, spits blood out of his mouth as his eyes slowly rove up to Ranboo's, *scared songbird scared scared sing for me*, and it falls furious and shaking in between them, "R-Remember me?"

Turning and spitting another glob of violet blood onto the ground, looks like a tooth goes with it this time, the man sneers around bloodstained teeth, "A'course...you're that *Enderbitch*, lil' *whiner*, *Mothers-* never had one *quite like you*, you were...such a *screamer*."

Ranboo's hands are shaking around the blaster, *never have before steadiest hands coming unraveled scared songbird he's on the ground looking up at you so why do you feel like it's reversed*, and the man grins wider like *he knows*, leans forward languorously to purr, "Mmm, not that I'm complainin', you have such a lovely voice, made the *prettiest noises*, jus' liiiiike a lil' songbird in his *gilded cage*. Gonna sing for me again, *wanna* sing for me bir-?"

Everything whites out, there's a sandstorm howling in his ears, blasting over the top of his head in freezing, buffeting waves, and Ranboo levels his arm, screeching, seething sound of breathless vicious *retribution* thundering under his skin as he pulls the trigger. Flash of bright red lights up the alley like a bomb's gone off, brutal elation flooding through him hearing the man scream, hands falling to clutch at his abdomen, blood so dark and thick it looks black leaking out over his fingers, *and the world spins*.

*Your blood under his boots his blood under your boots your blood under your own boots screams echoing long and horrible torn from your throat no one's coming no one's coming no one's-*

Ranboo staggers forwards, alley flickering in and out around him, sometimes, *the dark dingy hell he can't seem to get out of*, but this time, *BUT THIS TIME it's not him cowering in fear and bleeding it's not him it's not him IT'S NOT HIM THIS TIME HE HAS THE WEAPON THIS TIME HE'S IN CONTROL-*

Something scuffles behind him, *boots hitting the ground trying to slow momentum not now not now Ancients please not now*, breathy, panicked voice that doesn't have *any business* being here shouting, "R-Ranboo! What're-?"

"*Fuck off Tubbo!*" Ranboo shrieks, never *ever* going to take his eyes off the man writhing in front of him, thinks he might pass out from headrush seeing the way *terror* constricts his pupils, addressing *him -the monster-* now as he screams, "How does it feel? *How does it FUCKING FEEL?* Y-You scared? YOU SCARED! YOU-!"

"RANBOO! What the *fuck* are you-?"

"It was him! It- i-it-! I-IT WAS HIM! *IT WAS HIM!*" Ranboo roars, doesn't think he's making sense but his mind is in a thousand pieces, split apart by thermal knives, cracked into shards like broken pieces of horn, so much pain snarling up from his chest he can't breathe, *choked off like hands around your throat-*

"*I-Im-Imperializer-*" The Raider stutters out between pants of agonized breathing, squints his eyes closed as a spasm wracks his body, red depths swirling with vicious hatred as they creak back open, "S-Should'a- s-s-should'a killed you- s-slit your *throat-* I-let you b-b- *bleed out-* f-fuckin' Ender,  *fucking* IMPERIAL DOG! G-Go to HELL!"

*What about my people my planet do you think we deserve this*, howls in his ears, hits him like a blow to the head and Ranboo winces, brings his free hand up to press shaking fingers into his temples, snarling, "T-This isn't about *that!* It's- me! *It's a-about me- w-why! WHY!* E-Everything you did to m-me! W-WHY! What d-did I e-ever do to y-?"

"You d-destroyed m-my *h-h-home* you- d-dumb f-fuckin' *ch-chiokil!*" The Raider spits, blood flying out of his mouth, lips twisting up in a sick grin, *hand fisted in your hair forcing your limp head back same smile grinning down at you know your place chiokil*, "A-And I- I'd d-do it a- all again a-and laugh, f-f-fuck you! HA! D-Death t-to the *em-empire!* Des...deserved it- e-every b-bit birdie, an' a-an' I'd h-happily do it a-again, deser-"

Blood's flying everywhere and Ranboo flinches back, loud crack of a blaster shot echoing down the alley, stares confused at the crumpled over form of his living nightmare, nothing much left of that sneering, horrible smile. *Did I*, but no his hand is still hanging by his side so, *no not me wasn't me what how no no no no-* woodenly turns to look over his shoulder and there's Tubbo, standing with furious tears streaming down his face as he lowers his arms.

The barrel of his blaster is smoking.

"W-Wha- what t-the-" Ranboo whispers hoarsely, blinks because this isn't real *this can't be real*, goes to clear his throat and feels like there's fingers pressing into his windpipe, voice spiking in volume as he says, "W-What the fuck- *what the fuck! Fuck you!*"

Tubbo rears back offended, opens his mouth but before he can get a single word out, Ranboo is shouting, "*He was mine! He-* I-! Why! He was *MINE, TUBBO! WHY DID YOU SHOOT HIM?*"

"I- just- h-he *hurt you.*" Tubbo stammers, voice thick with the tears that run down his cheeks, and he sniffs hard, shaking his head as he whispers wretchedly, "I- I didn't t-think I- he...*he h-hurt you, Boo.*"

Twisting back around in mounting horror, Ranboo stares at the body in front of him and wishes its chest would rise, wishes it would make some noise of protest, so Ranboo could go over there and be the one to do it, watch the *fear* fade out of his eyes *along with his life but his chest is still he's silent it's over it's done he's dead-*

It feels like he gets struck by lightning, a furious charge that rolls up from his feet and rattles *everything*, and he's so angry, hands aching with the need to *tear into something*, rears his arm back before he can make a mistake he regrets and hurls his blaster down the alley. A splintering crack echoes back as it presumably breaks into a dozen pieces, and Ranboo fists both his hands in his hair and screams, wild and unhinged, sounds like he's on the verge of madness but he *doesn't care right now*.

Because that was his one chance, *his only chance*, to get the satisfaction of taking that fucking bastard out of this galaxy, to make him hurt like *Ranboo* was hurt, *and it was fucking taken from him just like all of your choices are poor little brother doesn't have control over anything spinning lost and confused through the endless night.*

"Shut up shut up SHUT UP!" Ranboo snarls like a caged animal, raking frantic livid claws through his hair, remembers dragging them down wooden doors in a panic, leaving gouges behind that *everyone* would point to later, and Reshaa laughs, *aw you've never had control not even a say over what happens to you and now, you'll never get closure will always be wondering what it would've felt like to be victorious for once you're a failure a disappointment shouldn't've teleported back-*

"Reshaa shut your *whore mouth* or *I'll do it for you!*" He screams spinning on his heel but of course she's not there, *she's not real she's not she's not she's not*, but Tubbo is, stands there frozen in place staring at Ranboo like he's- *like-* and with an enraged growl, Ranboo jabs a finger at him, "*And you! S-Stop fucking l-looking at me like t-that! I-I'm not crazy! I-I'm not! Fucking-! STOP IT!*"



Tubbo's face is pale, eyes wide in alarm, "I-"

*-think you are you need help you're insane you've lost it you never had it*, and it hits like a punch to the gut, has Ranboo screaming, *"I'M NOT CRAZY! I'M NOT! I don't need your help! I don't want to see a d-doctor, I-I don't n-need medication just- STOP TRYING TO FIX ME I'M FINE!"*

Everything's on horrible fire and seething through him until it's suddenly not, because Tubbo can never keep his emotions off his face, so Ranboo gets to see the exact instance his heart breaks. Tears pool and gather along his lash line, eventually overflow and run trailing down his face, brows curving sharply together as his lower lip wobbles, and the way he hunches into himself is so cracked open and *raw*, like a buckling piece of hull.

Ranboo thought there was ground under his feet but now he's not sure there ever was, vertigo spinning in his head as he stumbles forwards, hand pathetically outstretched like that's going to change anything, and at the sound of his boots scuffing, Tubbo whirls around and bolts. In his desperation to get away, he accidentally rams into someone walking near the mouth of the alleyway, slows enough that if Ranboo wanted to, he could catch up with him, stop him, pull him back and hold him close and whisper apologies into his hair.

But he doesn't, stays locked in place and watches Tubbo disappear like books fluttering wildly off the parapets, slowly looks down at his shaking hands, *skin too dark can't see the blood but it's there can feel it dried and tacky settled under his claws*, and curls them into fists.

What's *wrong* with him, but that's not really the right question because Ranboo knows, everything from his past haunts him all the time and he can never get rid of it, hangs over his head like an executioner's blade, and it's quaking now, dangerously close to falling and *that'd be nice-*

"Ranboo Zeethotad?"

Laboriously raising his head, Ranboo stares dead eyed at the figure standing at the edge of the alley, the same one Tubbo just bumped into and figures, *sure*, why the *fuck not*, this might as well happen, doesn't recognize the outfit they're in, but it looks sort of official and he *has* just killed two or so people.

*Should I leave a note do I get a phone call will it matter would he even pick up*, Ranboo scrubs his bloody hands across his face, back through his hair and honestly doesn't know the answer. He hadn't been thinking earlier, was completely lost in the monstrous well of emotions he's been trying to forget about for months now, but it hasn't gone anywhere, has all just been rotting and festering under the surface.

There's a gaping black hole where a door's supposed to be in his hallway and it oozes a thick, tar-like substance, but Ranboo knows it's not tar, *he knows what it is freezing burn down his face splashing onto cracked floors*, but he's been acting like if maybe he pretended hard enough, it'd erase what happened back then, *back there*.

Smoothing hands down to the sides of his neck, he can feel the little bumpy, raised edges of burn scars, traced over his skin in mindless patterns, remembers the first time he saw them in a mirror, how it felt like his heart was being squeezed in an iron grip, embarrassment coloring his face dark because he was never getting rid of them, they'd *be there forever*.

Ranboo doesn't like looking himself in the eye, but he hated in that instance meeting his own eyes and thinking *victim*. He didn't *want* to be a victim, someone that got taken advantage of, he didn't *want* to be weak and small and scared, he *wanted* to be powerful, strong, someone that others would look at in awe and not like there was something wrong with him.

He didn't want any of this to happen to him, *so then why did it was it his fault did he was it him*, and through the crushing despair, a memory slides out and settles around Ranboo's shoulders like a jolting, electrical arm, thinks he can smell something sweet in the air as a voice hushes, *we don't get to choose how others treat us this was done to you wasn't your fault*.

"Uh, Ranboo Zeethotad?" The cop asks again in a hesitant voice since he's been quiet for so long, and this has to be one of the most unsure law enforcers he's ever met, *void below*, and Ranboo jerkily nods his head.

He should probably flash his Syndicate ID and claim this was a mission, shuffles forwards and fumbles for his wallet before they can slap cuffs on him, and is wholly unprepared when they hold out a slim, dark flash drive instead.

There's no real identifying symbols on the drive or anything, but now that he's closer, Ranboo can see the swooping insignia on their jacket matches similar designs he's seen for interstellar couriers, not local law enforcement. He has a sinking, hazy thought as to what this's about, and only takes the damn thing because his brain defaults to basic social niceties once he's given up on being in charge of it.

And since he's checked out, it's probably the only thing that stops him from immediately punching the courier as they say, "Your father insists you contact him as soon as-"

*Fucking- of course of course can't catch a break can't get away why won't they leave me alone never cared before why do they now*, everything else the courier is saying lost in the blinding prickle of angry static that snaps and sparks in his head, and he wants to hit them, the person in front of him, his father, his sister, *himself*, drive his fists into the stone walls around him until his skin splits open and blood coats his knuckles.

Ranboo is so beyond anger he almost can't stand it, but it dawns on him like a cold splash of water to the face that being angry has never done anything for him, not really. It has never, *ever* made him feel better, actively makes him feel *worse*, and there was brief euphoria after pulling the trigger but was it worth it, did it make up for the way Tubbo's lip wobbled and the tears that raced down his face.

He knows what the answer is, knows it in a heartbeat, and it feels like something splits open in his head, like a support finally buckles and he understands with all consuming dread that he has a problem, *a lot of problems*, and that he can't keep going on like he has.

The courier's voice filters back in slowly as he regains awareness, *unwanted awareness* *Ancients fuck him what is he supposed to do*, and it makes his jaw tick back and forth, "-and if you need directions or assistance to a local call center, I can-"

"Go fuck yourself." Ranboo mutters under his breath, exhaustedly slipping his eyes closed since reality has started to warp and dance again and he just *can't right now*, doesn't need to be seeing Cyllellniad spread out before him, parapets rising in front of him, frantic, desperate compulsion to *jump* and escape everything.

The flash drive emits a few distressing cracks as Ranboo pierces it with his claws, thoroughly destroying whatever message it contained, and from his side, father murmurs, *don't you see don't you get it we're the only ones that still want you, you belong with us not out here, not with him, come home come back return to your grave-*

"I am just...so *fucking tired of you*." Ranboo whispers ragged and broken, blinks his eyes back open and turns to stare desperately at the wavering image of father, face completely blank and uncaring, doesn't know what he was expecting to see, *what he's trying to find*, sucks in a quaking inhale and practically cries, "Just- *leave m-me alone, p-please-*"

"I- are you um, are you talking to me?" The courier asks and Ranboo sighs, doesn't bother looking at them, still trying to find some shred of humanity in this ghastly thing he's made, murmurs softly when he can't find it, "No...no I'm not."

"Do you...have a short message you'd like to relay?" They hedge, clearly wanting to get out of here, uncomfortable with Ranboo addressing the empty air, and he almost laughs hysterical and unhinged, because *they* clearly think he's crazy and have only known him for a few short minutes.

So, what's the point of pretending? Ranboo can't hide it well enough anymore, Tubbo already knows so he's failed in that regard, and pretending like Tubbo *doesn't know* has only driven a wedge between the two of them. What it boiled down to, Ranboo realizes, is what's more important to him, keeping his pride and dignity, or keeping Tubbo.

And is it even really a contest?

"Short messa...n- no, you know what? Yeah actually..." Ranboo begins quietly, readjusts his hand and rams his claws all the way through the flash drive, splitting it apart into a thousand crackling shards of plastic and electronics he dusts out of his palm, "Yeah, can you tell my father to go throw himself off the palace for me?"

"E-Excuse me?" The courier asks slack jawed, and Ranboo brushes past them, legs a little shaky but they'll bear his weight, turns in the direction Tubbo ran and hopes he still has a chance, says flippantly over his shoulder, "You heard me. And it's not *Zeethotad*, it's Underscore. M-My name is Ranboo *Underscore*."

They hadn't talked about forgoing last names, Ranboo hadn't seen a point really, it wasn't necessary to prove they were married, and he hopes Tubbo doesn't mind that he's using his now, that he wants to *keep* using it.

He doesn't want to be *Ranboo Zeethotad of Annwyl* anymore, *Ranboo of cold lonely nights and no safe harbor and swirling black sands*, he wants to be *Ranboo Underscore of the Syndicate*, someone people would crowd close and sing happy birthday for, someone that's worthy of being married to the most incredible person in existence, someone that deserves to take their last name as his own.

Ranboo wants to be worthy of that title, *Underscore*, and everything it means, *family love safety kindness compassion*, but something has to change, has to give, just a little, and...he thinks it has to be him, feels something rumble in his maze of hallways, earth quaking under his feet as he pulls his handheld out and starts typing.

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### **Lesson Sixty-Seven: Leave no evidence of something you've helped with ~~do you count~~**

Cylleltniad rolls out from the base of Voidfall like a massive, glittering, cancerous growth, craggy shapes of desert mountains darkening the horizon. He can't see the wastes from here, but knows they're out there, dark, inky sands that roll and shift with the magnetic tides of the planet, *something beautiful about how they swallow everything*, and climbs up on the parapets trying to see better.

Ranboo stands between two towering slabs of black stone, shaking hand braced on each as he stretches up on his toes, cranes his neck trying to catch a glimpse of the roiling deserts of the night, *something alluring about how they destroy everything rip it into a thousand pieces could get lost forever out there*.

The breath catches in his throat, stolen from his lungs by the greedy, snapping fingers of the wind, same ones that comb through his hair, beckon him a little closer, *just one step closer come closer*, and he's tempted to. Gilded toes of boots shifting on slick black stone, and Ranboo kicks one out, dares for a second to wonder what it'd feel like, sailing through the air, *spiraling end over end fluttering wildly like pages of books how nice how nice to not feel so weighed down to be free*.

There's no blood on his clothes because he knows better now, threw the dagger down between a slim gap in the walls, *clinking rattling ping as it strikes thousands more*, and someone will find the body but Ranboo wants them to, hopes it gets Ritkik off his back, *deep puncture wounds on his ankles that have nasty black lines crawling out of them but the cobra was dead after he swung it into a wall and he wasn't dead because he knew to keep the antivenom on him*.

Dragging his foot back in, Ranboo pauses before shifting his weight, swings the other one out and he just climbs up here to see better, *he just climbs up here to see better he doesn't want to fall*, but like this, he's put all his weight on his bad leg, *the one with a spider-web of poison trying to eat his flesh*, and it buckles easily.

The world drops out from under him, great gaping, *hungry black maw* that seems to chitter and laugh as he loses his balance, wind tangling around him like hands that can't hold him anymore, a touch he's so desperate for, *misses so entirely*, he almost leans forwards into it, give himself up entirely to the only thing that wants to *have him*-

But something pulls sharply in his chest and Ranboo's hands catch him, force him back, send him tumbling back onto the palace roof and he hits the ground hard, air knocked out of his lungs as he stares unseeing up at the dark blue sky. The shaking always starts then, rattles his entire body, tenses his muscles and if he's not careful, it'll pull something, making him stiff in the morning as he sits at the breakfast table with everyone else, dozens of pairs of acidic green eyes narrowed on him in question.

It's hard to breathe, nothing seems to get to his lungs and the timing's off, too frantic too fast, but it's okay, if Ranboo passes out, his body will automatically start breathing on its own, *so convenient so useless*, but after a second, the dark spots are gone and he knows he has to get up, there's so much to do still, he can't be laying on the roof cloud gazing.

If Ranboo really wants to go to the Sunfleet Academy in a few years, he's got to make sure his marks are higher than everyone else's, *not going to can't get in on his name alone he can't do that but he can do this he can try and be worth something*, pushes himself up on shaky arms and takes a deep, rattling breath.

The wastes still aren't visible when he gets back to his feet, but that's okay, Ranboo thinks, turning to head back down.

He can always look for them again tomorrow.

Maybe he'll have better luck next time.

--

<3 fy heulwen <3

2:32

<< I'm sorry

<< I am really so incredibly sorry

<< I want to tell you in person too but I just. I need you to know right now that I regret all of that

<< and you're right

2:40

<< about everything

2:46

<< I do hear things I have for a long time

<< and void below it scares me so bad that you know

<< I've never told anyone and I...didn't really get the chance to tell you, and that's why I freaked out so bad. I felt like I didn't have a choice like it was being forced out of me.

<< Not that I'm blaming you!

<< Not at all!

<< it's not your fault you're smart and I'm insane

<< Ancients I do not like texting tone doesn't come across at all. Also I can't touch you which, actually, I don't even know if you'd want me to right now.

<< Sorry

<< Okay I'm rambling, but I'd really like to talk about. Stuff. Well. I don't want to

<< But I think I need to.

<< Anyway I don't know where you went but I hope you're safe. I love you so much, I know it might not seem like I do with the way that I act but. I do. I love you more than anything, Bo. You're the most important person in my life and I'm sorry I keep hurting you.

3:04

>> location shared!

Ranboo has never clicked on a link so hard, actually misses it the first few tries because his hands are shaking so bad, but once the map pops up, he forces himself to head in that direction. The walk isn't going to be long, few minutes tops, maybe ten if Ranboo really drags his feet which, wow, yup, he is totally going to do that *because ten minutes is too short of a time breathe you're okay breathe-*

He steps out of the crowded street and ducks under a royal blue awning, has to take a second to calm down, presses two fingers into the side of his neck and winces at how fast his pulse is hammering. It's going way faster than when he got pulled aside by *actual* cops half an hour ago, but they hadn't really seemed to care as they questioned him about the shootout, didn't even ask for his ID.

*Did they have blasters*, the one taking notes had asked, not 'who started it' just 'were they armed', and Ranboo haltingly said they did and that was the end of that. He shouldn't have been surprised at how easily it was brushed off, Iziya and her planet Shouko were some of the first to join the Sun Empire, the people here had no love for the Raiders.

They likely only tolerated the Syndicate because they generally minded their business, and even though he had his bomber around his waist, the cops took one look at Ranboo with his night dark skin, *sweeping horn lone green eye Ender privileged good people*, and decided he was innocent based on that alone.

*Aren't I in trouble*, Ranboo asked and the group of officers all laughed good naturedly, but it sounded cold to him, one with the notepad winking as they turned to go, *for what defending yourself*, tipped his hat as Ranboo tried to protest, bidding him a pleasant rest of his stay.

His handheld buzzes and Ranboo jumps, hadn't realized how lost in thought he was, *stalling stalling stalling*, until he sees the brief 'u good?' flash on his screen underneath the time, curses under his breath because it's been fifteen minutes since Tubbo texted him with his location.

<3 fy heulwen <3

3:29

<< ye sorry got distracted

>> ur okay stelle take ur time

Ranboo presses shaking fingers into the tiny text, hopes this means everything isn't over if Tubbo will still call him that, *thinks he's still worthy to be called that*. Tabbing back over to his map, Ranboo shakes his head roughly and he's got to get a move on, pick his feet up, but he's scared, *nervous-*

But he *wants* to do this.

Kinda.

Sorta.

*It's complicated.*

The only comparison he keeps coming back to is it's like a wound, and it's infected, festering and ugly and corrupted with years of repressed emotions. As it is, it hurts like hell, *shrieking laughter and every horrible thing you've never wanted to hear tears you up inside*, and cleaning it is going to be agony, *tell him explain everything scared so scared he's gonna leave he's gonna decide you're not worth it*, but...but it might feel better after that.

Maybe, *possibly*, he doesn't know, *he's scared to try*, but if Ranboo can somehow claw his way back to how things were a few weeks ago, he'll take it, *he'd jump at the chance*, forces himself to step back out into the street because he's going to *try*. He stumbles a bit with the

way his legs shake, probably looks like half the drunkards around him tripping home, but he puts one foot down in front of the other, keeps moving forward, *one step at a time he can do this*.

The directions take him a few blocks over, into a less commercialized section of the city, thick drip of greenery hanging over low walls and crowding what free space is available. Buildings here look more like apartments or places locals would frequent, and it's outside a brightly glowing convenience store that Ranboo finally sees Tubbo.

He's leaning up against a wall, both sets of arms folded as he stares out into the night, chin tipped down low to his chest, and Ranboo stalls, reminded of when they first met, fluttering, nervous feelings squashed quiet thoroughly under a bootheel when Tubbo dropped his title completely. Ranboo knows now it wasn't with malicious intent, but at the time, all he knew was that he didn't have a *chance*, and he's not sure he has one now either.

*Maybe he just called you stelle out of reflex maybe he regrets maybe he wants this to be it maybe he's tired maybe he's ready to say goodbye*, but before Ranboo can decide to melt away into the night or not, Tubbo's antennae flick and he looks up, pins Ranboo with that intense gaze of his. There's no escaping, not from that, and Ranboo shuffles over, tail coiling around one of his legs anxiously, trying to figure out where to even *start* apologizing when the air is stolen from his lungs as Tubbo says resolutely, "I am a bad partner."

And there's not even a chance to refute him because he keeps going in an even, no nonsense tone, like he's not about to accept any arguments nor logic, "I'm sorry for...for a lot of things, but I'm sorry for pushing you. I- I'm self-centered I guess, I-I keep thinking what helped *me* is gonna help you and like...you're not *me*. And I have to stop *assuming* you're gonna be."

"Tubbo-" Ranboo whispers hoarsely, clicks his mouth shut as Tubbo holds a hand up, beseeching look in his eyes, "Just...give me a sec, o-okay? I um...I-I just need to say this..."

Nodding his head reluctantly, Ranboo winds his arms together and slouches against the wall next to Tubbo, claws nervously picking at loose threads on his t-shirt. Tubbo sucks in a shaky breath, turns to face him a little better and says, "First off, whatever you want to do about your um, y-your uh, *mental health*? Is entirely up to you...I-I'm sorry if I ever implied it *wasn't*. You are more than capable of making your own decisions about medication o-or if you wanna see someone, I..."

He sighs and rakes a hand through his hair, fingers clamping down on the back of his neck, "You're right...it's really *not* my business, and I-I kept telling myself I *wasn't* cornering you again, a-and maybe *I* didn't think I was, but you felt like I was, and that's all that matters. I try and take stuff head on but...that's not the way you like to handle things...is it?"

*One hundred lessons you had to recite perfectly none of them are about being honest cobras in your bed and sisters that wanted you gone*, and Ranboo can only mutely shake his head, resignation settling over Tubbo's shoulders as he deflates, looking like he got the answer he didn't want to hear but was expecting, "Exactly. But I kept trying to get you to confront it anyway, because *that's* what helped *me* get out of bed and back in the cockpit."



Tubbo bows his head then, so, *so* guilty looking it makes Ranboo *ache*, hushes glumly to the ground, “And I kept thinking it’d help you too, i-in the long run, t-that you were just being *difficult* but it didn’t help...I-I only made you feel *worse*. ”

“Sorry...” Ranboo can’t help mumbling, drops his eyes and they fixate on how Tubbo’s hands fidget, trembling fingers touching around his wrists, *looking for gold bands looking for cuffs oh sunshine*, can’t stop the way he reaches for him even as Tubbo insists, “It’s *not* your fault. We handle things differently, a-and I should be more understanding...I shouldn’t *get mad at you*, I-I shouldn’t lose my temper...I should be *better* for you *and I-I’m not- m’so sorry-*”

“You’re the best thing I’ve ever had.” Ranboo whispers, smoothing his hands up over Tubbo’s lower set of wrists, curl gently around his elbows, wishes he had another pair of hands to comfort him with, to hold him like he deserves to be held.

But all Ranboo has is himself, steps forward and swings his tail up, winds it around Tubbo’s waist as he crowds into his personal space, feet stair stepped like the weirdest little puzzle, *only two pieces don’t fit in anywhere else only fit with one another*, “I-It’s okay, Bo, you don’t need to apologize, you d-didn’t do anything w-”

“I need you to listen to me.” Tubbo interrupts quickly, upper hands letting go of one another as they surge to cup Ranboo’s face, shaking violently where fingers trail across his skin, “Don’t tell yourself this is okay because you love me. Forgive me if you like, b-but don’t say it’s okay, that how I’ve been acting is *okay*, ‘cause it’s not Boo, i-it’s *really* not.”

“B-But I know I *hurt you-*”

“That could literally not matter less right now.”

“It *matters to me*. ” Ranboo snaps, ears flicking back in agitation, and it’s one of the most important things in the entire universe, *never hurt Tubbo*, but for such a simple thing, Ranboo always seems to be failing it, “I shouldn’t have y-yelled *at you*. ”

“Ranboo, I know it’s hard for you to understand this, but you *really* are the priority right now. I’m serious.” Tubbo demands softly, and his eyes are so dark, reflect back a thousand lights, tiny galaxies spinning in them that swallow Ranboo whole, “Forget me and please think about yourself, I...get mad at me, scream, cuss me out, w-whatever you *want*...t-tell me you never wanna s-see me again but don’t tell me this is okay, *please*. ”

Quick blink and the universe is gone but then it’s back in all its spiraling glory, staring at Ranboo with nothing but infinity, and he always thought he fell in love with Tubbo on Tjhia-Yuet, but he wonders if maybe it was sooner, if it started on a dark landing pad when a hand was held out to him and the promise of the stars shone behind a brilliant smile.

*Thought I’d meet you out there stelledore-*

“You put so much blame on yourself, and you don’t need to. *Fuck-* Boo, you really don’t need to, not over this, *not with me*. A-All of this is on me, okay? *I failed you*. ” Tubbo’s hands

are still trembling, quaking with nerves or fatigue or both, but there's nothing unsure about the way he touches Ranboo, *like he wants him still*.

And he's thought it before, but it just really hits Ranboo now how well Tubbo knows him, and he turns his head, nosing at one of Tubbo's shaking hands and murmurs, "M'sorry for yelling at y-you, can't c-change my mind o-on that. I um...I-I really l-lost it back there a-and, *Ancients*, t-that wasn't okay, I-I was- I was a-acting i-in- insa- am, *a-am insan-*"

"You're *not insane*." Tubbo rushes out frantically and slides his hands to the back of Ranboo's head, fingers tangling through his hair as he urges him down, bringing their foreheads together, "You're *not*. I-I shoulda said it earlier, shoulda reassured you from the start. You're not crazy, I don't think less of you, I *love* you, and I support you one hundred percent, stelledore."

Ranboo swallows harshly, clicks in the back of his throat, sobs starting to catch under his ribs, and Tubbo smiles tired and soft, leans in and brushes their noses together, "We do things on *your* time, tesoro. Whatever you wanna talk about or not, I support you- *I'm here for you*, no matter what...until the end of *time*, until the end of space, Ranboo."

He has to bite his lip hard to keep the bubbling cries inside, jerks sharply from an aborted sob and twists his head away from the road, hides in Tubbo's messy curls. Warm fingers pet through his hair, *so gentle so kind*, so very different from the sense memories that have been terrorizing him tonight, *scared songbird* ghosting along the shell of an ear and Ranboo whimpers, shifts to hold onto Tubbo for dear life.

"S-Sorry ab- about e-earlier I- w-was- *am- a-am* s- sc-scared, I- h-he *h-hurt m-m-me-*" Ranboo gasps disjointedly, understands that probably makes no sense to Tubbo, but he can't get enough air to try and explain himself. Arms tighten around him then, and Ranboo realizes it might not matter, *he's always known you always understood the words stuttering out of your mouth seen through everything*, knows he's right when Tubbo croaks, "I'm s-so sorry, *amor*. F-Fuck! I-I shouldn't've- I- I-I messed up, I messed u-up *so bad*...I- I shoulda let you do it."

Ranboo cries sharply hearing that, and then again as Tubbo murmurs, "Do you f-forgive me?"

Nodding his head quickly, Ranboo works on keeping the sobbing down, tries to find solace in the searing heat Tubbo radiates, *little sun in your arms sleeping on your chest so fierce so loving so protective and brilliant and you love him love him so much and he loves you-*

They sway back and forth for a while, Ranboo taking even breathes and Tubbo whispering to him sweet in Apian, and it's unclear if he knows how much Ranboo understands now, wrapping a set of fingers around what's left of Ranboo's right horn and hushes in his native language, "*Love you so much, wish I could be more for you, wish I deserved you.*"

"Y-You *deserve me*." Ranboo stutters back in poorly accented Apian, words getting caught up around hitching inhales, but it must have been understandable because Tubbo freezes, the way he sucks in air making it clear he didn't know Ranboo could understand him.

Pulling back a little, Ranboo smiles shaky at the embarrassed color on his face, brings a hand up and combs through his hair, finds his braid and lovingly wraps a hand around it, “S-Sorry, I’m um, s-still learning so I *can*’t- b-but you do deserve me, heulwen, but I understand where you’re coming from...I feel the same w-way.”

“T-Two peas in a pod.” Tubbo mumbles wetly, sniffs harshly and rubs his nose against a shoulder, and Ranboo hasn’t heard that saying but he thinks he gets it, nods and tugs on his braid lightly, “Two halves of a whole shulker.”

Tubbo laughs but it sounds almost like a sob, creaks out of him as he digs knuckles into one of his glassy eyes, “I um...y-your Apian’s gotten really good, and I was just...been wondering, um...w-would you teach m-me E-Enderian?”

“I- y-you don’t have to.” Ranboo stammers on reflex, worries for half a second he’s guilt tripped Tubbo into thinking he has to learn Enderian as a form of repayment, but Tubbo shakes his head, set of hands moving to hold Ranboo around the waist, “I *want* to- i-if that’s okay. I...it just means a lot to *me*, hearing you speak my language- *b-but it’s okay if you don’t if-* sorry, um, not thinking about you again *I-*”

“Hey, hey, heulwen, *Bo*, it’s okay, sorry- m’sorry, should’ve said I forgave you sooner, it’s okay, you’re okay.” Ranboo soothes, hands moving to cup Tubbo’s face, and his heart jumps painfully in his chest when Tubbo leans hard into the contact, nuzzling at him like Ranboo does, “I- I- y-yeah I-I’ll teach you um, w-what do you want to know?”

“Tell me how to say ‘I love you’.” Tubbo demands softly, and it feels like stardust lights up in his chest, tail poofing where it’s wrapped around Tubbo’s waist. Mouth suddenly very dry, Ranboo has to take a minute before he can respond, stammers out the phrase in Enderian, *ti yw fy unig un you are my only one*, heart drumming loud in his chest as Tubbo parrots it back horribly.

And he gets it now, he really, *really* gets it now, hearing Tubbo try and express his affections in the language Ranboo grew up hearing, and he’s never liked his mother tongue before, but thinks he can maybe see the beauty Tubbo finds in it as he butchers every word, all in an attempt to tell Ranboo he adores him.

*He loves me he really loves me*, and it’s not a new realization, but it’s still an earth shattering one, and somewhere around the fourth or fifth attempt, when Tubbo’s brows draw down in concentration, little furrow between them that Ranboo loves so much, something eases up within him. That compounding pressure that’s been crippling him seems to fade away, and in its place *cool hand through his hair tugging on an ear littlest one don’t be afraid trust him trust me trust yourself*, and he sighs almost relieved, *hi mama*.

*Missed you darling never forgot you don’t forget me remember what I told you remember yourself trust him*, mother calls softly and in his mind, she’s always healthy like he never saw her, stardust in her smile and auroras burning in her eyes. A not there arm curls around his shoulders in something like a hug, *not alone not alone it’s okay I’m here he’s here trust little one*, and it feels like its drawn out of him slowly as he whispers, “I...I think I’m...I...c-can I tell you? A-About things?”

“Ti yow- y-wey- t-ti- huh? Oh, o-oh! Um yeah, yeah of course, but just- *I- y-you* don’t have to, okay? You know that right? Like I don’t wanna make you feel like you hav-”

“I want to.” Ranboo says softly, it’s...*it’s not a lie he does he’s tired he’s been alone for so long trapped with the things in his head and he hates them and they hate him but he loves Tubbo and somehow Tubbo loves him*, bends down and presses his cheek into Tubbo’s hair, dusty smell of lavender and warm earth, smiles as an antenna drags along his face tenderly, “I...I’m really tired of being on my own. B-But- just you o-okay?”

“Okay...okay, Boo. Do you wanna go back to the Eshachi or...?” Tubbo trails off feeling Ranboo shake his head, and it’s not that he doesn’t love their ship, but there’s just so many strong feelings and memories caught up with it. Someplace neutral would be better, and tilting his head, Ranboo eyes the glowing windows of the twenty-four hour convenience store, looks completely dead since it’s now *well* into the early hours before dawn.

“Come on, let’s see if they have those canned coffees you like.” Ranboo says, only steps away enough to tug Tubbo in the direction of the front door, keeps his tail around his waist and feels some tension bleed out of him when two arms hook through his own.

An electronic noise plays as they walk in, but no one is behind the register, and upon closer inspection, it actually looks like this place is unmanned, frighteningly chipper looking animatron hovering near the checkout lanes that beeps at them excitedly. Ranboo awkwardly waves at it, ducks into the nearest aisle while Tubbo snickers at him, tips to rest his head on Ranboo’s shoulder as he giggles, “Dork.”

“*Polite.*” Ranboo snips back, stares down a long row of offensively colorful packaging and squiggling letters he can’t even remotely read, wanders without real purpose and tries to figure out where to start. Wanting to talk and actually starting are two very different things, and Ranboo knows if he looked at Tubbo and said *you know what changed my mind*, he wouldn’t argue, not now not anymore.

*We do things on your time tesoro*, his mind nudges at him gently and he knows that, but he also meant what he said, *tired of being on my own*, and he is, he *really is*. This entire process, relearning basically everything, addressing and trying to live with all that’s happened, has been void awful and harrowing, and it probably will *continue* being void awful and harrowing, but having them- *Tubbo Ozzi Dream* -has made it bearable.

There are no easy answers, some days are going to be better than others, but Ranboo’s starting to think he’s going to be okay with that, that whatever stupid idea he had in his head about *normalcy* doesn’t actually exist. He isn’t perfect, *Tubbo* isn’t perfect, their relationship isn’t, they mess up a lot, make mistakes, *hurt one another*, and it honestly doesn’t matter in the face of what they have, not really.

It trickles through Ranboo slowly, like the realization after standing in the doorway of his dorm craving death and realizing that his life was his own, that that’s what caring for someone really is, making the choice, *the effort* to work through all of the bad times. Sharing your life with another person isn’t easy, but one look down at Tubbo’s head, antennae twitching absentmindedly to the tinny music spilling out of speakers overhead, warm weight of him against Ranboo’s side, and he knows it’s always going to be worth it.

“My oldest sister tried to have me committed to a sanitorium.” Ranboo finds himself saying, and Tubbo’s antennae still, no longer dipping back and forth, and Ranboo wets his lips, “I um...i-it wasn’t because she was worried or cared um...s-she really hated me, wanted me gone...was probably hoping I’d end up k-killing myself.”

Tubbo jerks violently, snaps his head up and Ranboo has to remind himself the anger he sees in those dark eyes isn’t for him, continues quietly, “I-I don’t think she knew *e-everything*, but it um, i-it wasn’t a hard thing to sell, t-that I w-was c- *a-am crazy*.”

“You’re not crazy.” Tubbo insists hotly, indignant frustration spiking his words harsh, *feels so much all the time cares for you loves you angry on your behalf not at you at her*, and Ranboo smiles ruefully, skittering his eyes away to colorful boxes, “I mean...kinda, little bit, y-you were right I um...I-I...I-”

And *Ancients*, it is so hard to say this, but Ranboo finds some ridiculous looking cartoon on a box with its smile halfway up its head and murmurs absentmindedly, “I do hear things, voices, but they’re not natural...*I made t-them*.”

“I don’t...sorry, could you um, *i-if you want but*, w-would you...mind explaining?” Tubbo asks hesitantly, voice more unsure than Ranboo’s ever heard, and casting a nervous glance down at him, Ranboo relaxes seeing the soft tilt to his face. *No judgment don’t think less of you support you here for you*, and they round the corner to the next aisle, Ranboo sighing as he looks more squarely at Tubbo, “You...ever have imaginary friends?”

It looks like they’ve found the drink aisle, vibrant cartons packaged together and metallic cans reflecting in the overhead lights, and Tubbo shrugs, never taking his eyes off Ranboo, “Not really, not that I can remember at least.”

*Figures as much he never would’ve wanted for attention always someone to tell him they care for him or hold him gently*, and the laugh that tumbles from Ranboo’s mouth is humorless, it’s dry and dead, sounds like the winds that howl out in the wastes of Annwyl, “I-I didn’t really have a choice, I didn’t...no one would...I didn’t have a lot of um, o-of *friends*. No one cared really since I was the last of *eight*, wasn’t even the *spare*. I...had a l-lot of time to m-myself.”

“You were lonely...”

“Cripplingly so.” Ranboo says and then feels irrational shame for having admitted it, snaps his eyes away to look for that canned coffee Tubbo really likes, the one that had a nutty aftertaste, “I...needed someone to talk to and- it...t-things just...got out o-of hand.”

*Understatement of the year*, Reshaa snickers, cold fingers curling over his throat, *when are you going to tell him what we tell you do you think he’s going to stick around through that once he knows how unstable you actually are*, feels like her claws nick him and Ranboo twitches, free hand coming up to rub at his neck.

“Was...was that- uh, was um...” Tubbo trails off, clearly unsure how to ask, *if* he can ask what he wants, and running his hand around to the back of his neck, Ranboo squeezes briefly, conditioned hesitation and automatic refusals at his lips, but he bites them back.

*Don't have to tell him but I want to I'm going to I'm not gonna keep avoiding the things I want-*

"Y-Yes." Ranboo answers in a fake light voice, going for casual and failing as his eyes scan rows and rows of cans in varying shades of brown. *What are you doing WHAT ARE YOU DOING*, a distorted echo screams from the winding nightmare of his maze, but he ignores it, keeps comparing all the cans to the image in his head as he tries not to have a breakdown, "It was um...i-it was my sister- *o-one* of them. Reshaa. S-She's oldest."

"She...tried to have you *committed*." The amount of poorly masked, seething *hatred* in that sentence has Ranboo shivering, and he's really glad he's distracted looking for that one particular can design, mumbles, "I...y-yeah, I-like I said, she n-never really liked me."

"Well I don't really fucking *like her*." Tubbo grumbles petulantly and something about the way he says it makes Ranboo laugh, *genuinely*, sounds like something a pissy child would snap at another on the playground. He looks back down at Tubbo, can't help giggling at the putout expression on his face, reaches over fondly and brushes hair behind his ear, "I don't really fucking like her either."

"Is that why you...you made a- *fake* her?" Tubbo tilts his head before Ranboo can draw back, nudges his hand so he'll keep contact, and Ranboo smooths fingers across his cheek as Tubbo asks sheepishly, "Because the real one is horrible?"

"Kinda." Ranboo sighs, not sure where to even begin with this one, doesn't know if child him had any real intentions besides a fix for being desperately lonely, "I...it didn't start out like this, t-they used to be uh- *okayish*, but it changed. I um- the s-specters, t-that's what I call them, but uh- b-but they're...not um...*nice*...to me...a-anymore?"

Something fall's in Tubbo's expression, *pity its pity he feels sorry for you you're not a thing to pity*, and Ranboo flinches, Tubbo jerking not a second later, arms moving to slide up Ranboo's arm, voice quiet but frantic as he stammers, "S-Sorry! Sorry! W-What did- I- *sorry*, was it something I-I said or was it Res- *n-not assuming*! Sorry, I-I'm not-!"

"Hey, i-it' okay, Bo. *Promise*. You didn't do anything wrong." Ranboo rushes to comfort, and it almost feels like their roles are swapped, like Tubbo's the overly paranoid stressy one and Ranboo's in charge of calming him back down, "Are you um, a-are you okay?"

"Yes. No. I...I-I don't know." Tubbo sighs, raking a hand through his hair and pushes it out of his eyes, looks up at Ranboo guilty, "S-Sorry, not trying to bring my problems into this. Just forget about it okay?"

Shifting his hand to more surely cup Tubbo's cheek, Ranboo curls long fingers out behind his ear, thumb dragging along his cheekbone, and Tubbo sucks in a shaky inhale. "I can't forget anything, remember?" He tries to joke, wan little smile that can usually draw one out of Tubbo, but his lips don't even twitch, and Ranboo's brows furrow, "You okay? I...I'm worried about you...you're not acting like yourself."

Shrugging sloppily, Tubbo won't look at him, stares instead somewhere around Ranboo's chin, but even then, Ranboo can see how glassy his eyes get, can hear the tremulous shake in

his voice that always means he's trying not to cry, "I...y-yeah, I'm...just, m-my head's bein' uh, *difficult- b-but!* I am uh, paying a-attention, *promise*, I- you're my number one priority r-right now, d-don't *worry-*"

"Well you're *my* number one priority right now. What's wrong, heulwen?" Ranboo murmurs lowly, and Tubbo screws his eyes closed, something uncomfortably hot colliding with Ranboo's thumb not a second later, searing burn marking it as tears. Fingers darting out to wipe away the wayward drops, something in Ranboo cracks in half hearing the little whimper Tubbo makes, hasn't heard him sound that miserable since Imuna, when he laid sick and almost dying.

"Oh heulwen, oh tesoro, don't cry. I'm here, I'm right here." Ranboo whispers, goes to pull Tubbo into him but he won't budge, whips his head back and forth when Ranboo tries again, gasping, "S-Stop! I- d-don't feel bad for *me*, I- s-sorry! I shouldn't b- b-be c-cr-crying! I- sorry! S-*Sorry*, sorry, *s-sorry s-sorry-!*"

The noise Tubbo makes is heart wrenching, so unbearably sad and angry and *lost*, and he jerks away, fists two hands in his hair, yanking harshly, "F-Fucking *fuck! Fuck m-me! I- I-I'm s-sorry*, I- j-just- give me a-a minute, *f-fucking shit-!*"

*Feels so much all the time hits him hard and fast and all at once*, and Ranboo keens long and low, starts to reach out for him and stops, wrings his hands awkwardly because Tubbo asked for a minute, but Ranboo wants to comfort him *so badly*. Touch is always how they've found solace in one another, but he doesn't know if that'd be welcome right now or not, and then he *remembers- flinching back and he looks so guilty sits you down hand in hand sorry sorry I'll start asking I'll start asking before I touch I'll ask if-* "Touch good or bad right now, heulwen?"

"M'you d-don' have t- t-to." Tubbo mumbles wetly, shoulders hitching as he cries, and that's not really an answer, but it's not a *no*, and Ranboo shuffles forwards a little, "I want to- *i-if you w-want* me too, um- I just really wanna comfort you."

Tubbo looks up then, and the overhead lights throw everything into sharp relief, highlighting the bags under his red rimmed eyes, something Ranboo hasn't noticed until now. *When did those get there has he not been sleeping either just lying awake all night can't shut his brain off*, a few more tears roll down his cheeks and that's it for Ranboo.

He's slow about it, but Ranboo does reach for him, and when Tubbo doesn't flinch away or protest, he fits his hands around his face, hides the wince he wants to make as the tears prick and sting his skin. "What's wrong?" Ranboo murmurs gently, brushes the last of the moisture away, fingertips uncomfortably warm from chemical burns, "Please...I- you don't have to t-tell me but...I want to help, *i-if* I can."

"S'isn't about *me*." Tubbo insists, so determined, *so stubborn*, so used to pushing his own hurts aside when it comes to the people he cares about that it's hard to notice sometimes, when *he's* struggling. But Ranboo knows him better than he's known literally anyone else in his life, and can make a guess as to what's tearing him up.

There's not many things more important to Tubbo than being a good friend, a good partner, a good son, a good *husband*, and he only feels like he's accomplished that if he keeps everyone safe, is able to shelter them from every bad thing that's ever existed. It's not necessarily realistic, but Tubbo is prone to ideals and taking too much on, and the thing eating him alive right now is the crippling fear he hasn't protected Ranboo from any of it.

"It wasn't your fault." Ranboo hushes, starts with the biggest one, *rattling back of a dark ship blood down your face haze in your head*, shifts his hands so his fingers can scratch through Tubbo's hair, claws getting stuck in tangled snarls, "You didn't know that I'd call the Raiders...you didn't know they'd *t-take me*."

Tubbo jerks and Ranboo knows he guessed right, because if there's one thing he's learned about him, it's that Tubbo's desire to help others is the most pure, sincere motivation that drives him, and in his mind, all he sees are the ways he's failed Ranboo.

"I-I shouldn't've *l-left you*." Tubbo hiccups, stares up at Ranboo like he's seeing a ghost, *like he's looking at his sentencing*, a monument to all his shortcomings, "I- I- *I shouldn't have y-yelled at you*, I- I shoulda s-stayed I- I l-let them *h-hurt you*-"

And it starts with the Raiders but it doesn't end there, it's every argument they've ever had, anytime Ranboo relapsed into something self-destructive, the insomnia the cutting the screaming at one another, whatever Tubbo can twist and warp in his head to prove that he's let him down.

"I-It's *my f-fault* t-that h-happened to y-you, a-a-and I-I'm your *p-partner*, I-I'm supposed to *protect y-you*." Tubbo's lower lip trembles spastically, thick, fat tears beading along his lashes and spilling down his face, "B-But a-all I- I've done is *fail you*! I-I almost l-lost you o-on Goi, w-wasn't fast enough and y-you had to m-make *that j-jump* a-and then *Bosnoir*. *F-Fuck*, I-I shoulda stopped you I- *I shoulda stopped you*, b-but I *didn't*. A-And- and, a-and you- y-you almost *k-kill*-"

He breaks down crying before he can actually say it, falls forwards and clutches at Ranboo like a drowning man, desperate to keep his head above water but he's sinking and sinking fast, slipping down into the black murky depths of his own self loathing.

"That wasn't *your fault*." Ranboo repeats stronger this time, cradles the back of his head while he sobs and starts working the tangles in his hair loose, "I'm okay now, amor, I-I got through it. You did *everything* you could to support me, t-to love me and-"

"*And it wasn't enough*. I- *I w-wasn't enough*- a-all I do is m-make you feel w-w-worse! I-I'm a shit friend, a *s-shit partner*, I-I can't do anything right I- *f-fuck*! A-And now I-I'm just making this a-about *me*." Tubbo howls, flames of anger starting to curl to life under his words, and Ranboo tenses even though he knows this isn't directed at him.

Tubbo isn't an angry person, there's just so much and it never has anywhere to go, but Ranboo always takes it personally and that's not entirely fair to Tubbo. He's made countless allotments for Ranboo, understands his paranoia and neurotic tendencies, is usually abundantly patient which is startling in a person that's constantly wanting to be moving forwards.



They both have their shortcomings, not ideal ways they express themselves, but Tubbo tries for him and Ranboo really needs to try for him, pulls him closer and forces the memory of fists swinging at him out of his mind. *He already apologized need to let it go stop holding grudges stop holding everything so close*, Ranboo props his chin up on Tubbo's head, feels the way he shakes and trembles and starts humming, *move on move forwards be like him let it go move on*, and slowly, but surely, Tubbo starts to still.

"It wasn't your fault." Ranboo tips his head down and presses the words into the top of Tubbo's head, really, *really* hopes it gets through to him, *through his thick skull*, Ranboo thinks with a fond snort as he drags his hand through tangle free hair, "None of it was. You aren't responsible for things outside of your control, including *me*...and I know you don't *want* to hear it but...you can't protect me from everything, amor."

Turning his head to the side, Tubbo huffs out a wet breath in the crook of Ranboo's neck, but his hands have gone from clenching to dragging gentle shapes over his shoulders, small of his back, and Tubbo mumbles thickly, "*Want to*, most *important* thing, Boo. Don't want you to be *hurt*. *Ever*."

"My little knight." Ranboo whispers affectionately, drops one of his hands in-between Tubbo's shoulder blades, scratches lightly where his wings connect and it's like he flipped an off switch, Tubbo untensing immediately. Pressing down carefully, Ranboo works on some of the knots in his muscles, *tense so tense needs a break*, runs his fingers up the thick vein at the top of Tubbo's wing, grins hearing that rattling noise he only makes when he's at his most content.

"I love you so much." Ranboo murmurs softly, gentle pads of his fingers skimming over thinner veins and silky slick membrane, has never dared touch his wings like this before, but Tubbo's not complaining, feet actually starting to slip on the floor like he's falling asleep standing up.

Tail swinging up and around his waist to help steady him, Ranboo trails his fingers back down his wing, Tubbo shaking with how hard he's buzzing, making so much noise he's kinda drowning out the peppy music playing in the store, so that Ranboo has to speak up to make sure he's heard.

"I know lately you've been the one supporting me, and I really *really* appreciate it, but don't forget it goes both ways." Ranboo says, hand drifting down Tubbo's spine, comes to a comfortable resting spot in the small of his back, "You can lean on me if you need to, I know...I'm kinda a mess, but I'm not gonna break apart. I wanna protect you too, marchogion."

Tubbo mumbles something too indistinct, gets lost and distorted in the last echoing rattles that shake out of his mouth, and Ranboo makes a questioning noise, prompting him to take a deep breath, repeating horribly accented but understandable, "T-Ti yw...fy unig uh- *un*."

It feels like Ranboo's heart flips, something gooey and warm dripping down through his chest, like the sticky press of a summer night is billowing in his lungs, and he trills, purring too loud and unabashedly as he croons, "Ti yw fy unig un, Tubbo, fy cariad, fy calon, *fy haul*. Gallwch ddweud wrthyf- *uh*, I-I mean, um, y-you can always talk to me, okay? Do you...?"

With a long sigh, Tubbo shakes his head, shifts enough so he can look at Ranboo with one hazy eye, “M’tired, m-maybe later...c-can we...w-would it be okay if- i-if we go h-home? I-I know the mission a-and I *feel bad*, but...m’so *tired*.”

“Of course, darling, you come first. And it’ll be okay, Techno’ll understand. Do you want anything for the trip back?” Ranboo asks and at first, Tubbo’s shaking his head no but then his eyes go wide, wings flickering behind him in brief excitement as he hedges, “Um...d-do’ya- r-remember those uh, little like, *squishy* ice cream balls we had the other day? Do’ya think they’d have them here?”

“We can check.” Ranboo says warmly, only steps back enough to hold out a hand in offering, and Tubbo takes it with a shy smile, curls his left arms around Ranboo’s right, and it feels like their weird little two piece puzzle has slotted back together.

There’s so much to look at, it’s easy to get lost, and since they’re resigning the mission, there’s no pressing need to be anywhere and Ranboo just takes a second to enjoy the comfort of existing, relishing in the feel of Tubbo’s head resting against his shoulder as they meander around the convenience store.

“Thank you.” Ranboo murmurs at some point, eternally grateful he was wrong for once and that Tubbo still loves him regardless of *everything*, and Tubbo tips his head up, quizzical look on his face, “For what?”

*For listening for apologizing for being patient for trying to work with me for loving me as much as you do*, and Ranboo smiles a bit helplessly, thinks he can sum it up nicely with, “For not thinking I’m crazy I guess.”

And Tubbo just blinks at him, Ranboo worrying for half a second he said something wrong, but then a rueful smile is twitching his lips up, “Well I guess I should thank you too then.”

“For what?” Ranboo parrots baffled, breath stolen from his lungs as Tubbo’s eyes settle right on his, feels like he sees straight through him, past his bones past his maze, *all the way to his core*, grin stretching so that dimples appear in his cheeks as he says soft, “For not thinking I’m crazy either.”

Ranboo’s known for a while that there is no one else for him in existence besides Tubbo, feels some days like he was *born* to know him, but it’s hard convincing himself of the reverse, has had it at the back of his mind that if he wasn’t around, Tubbo would’ve found someone else to love.

But he’s maybe starting to realize that’s not true, that there really isn’t anyone else that fits with Tubbo like Ranboo, *two weird little pieces of a puzzle that don’t go anywhere else*, like they were made for each other, and he steps closer, squeezes their hands together, maybe starts to consider he’s actually worthy of loving Tubbo like he deserves to be loved.

Neither one of them can read the language here, nor recognize half the pictures of ingredients pictured on boxes and wrappers, but it’s fun, making up their own interpretations of what everything is. Ranboo doesn’t really think he’s that funny, his personal brand of humor is

more dry and sarcastic than silly, but he's really trying, keeps up the dick and ball jokes until Tubbo can't breathe he's laughing so hard.

There's faint music playing, something bubbly and saccharine happy, and Ranboo spins them lazily down aisles, does the formal court dances that has Tubbo hanging on to him tightly, a set of arms looped around his neck and other around his waist. Their movements are sloppy and messy, Ranboo not really caring about hitting all the correct steps rather than just enjoying the feel of dancing with Tubbo, knocks their foreheads together and adores the way his eyes shine.

And it's after Ranboo's dipped him, before he pulls him back up, where they're both staring each other in the eye, that something passes over Tubbo's face, and it's not quiet awe or love, it's a little complicated, *surprised shocked dawning thought confused understanding-*

"What?" Ranboo questions softly as he helps him regain his balance, and Tubbo shakes his head mutely, stares at Ranboo like he's maybe seeing him for the first time and whispers ragged, "I...I-I don't know."

It's fine if he doesn't want to talk about it, Ranboo won't press him, and they detangle a little, Tubbo looking like he's lost in thought as they finally find the freezer section. Thankfully, the box of ice cream things has its picture on the front and Tubbo gets distracted trying to pick a flavor, silly mood returning that follows them all the way up to the register, but this time it's *Ranboo* wheezing for air.

"Shut *up!*" He laughs, desperately swatting at Tubbo who wiggles his eyebrows erratically, keeps cutting his gaze to the oblivious animatron ringing them up, the one who does *not* look it's nose is a dick...but...it actually *kinda* does, and a hysterical bubble of laughter spits out of Ranboo's mouth.

He has enough experience with sleep deprivation to know they're both edging into being punchy, that stupid, goofy state before you crash, tripping into one another on their way towards the door, shaking with involuntary giggles over nothing in particular. An electronic ding plays as the door opens to let a couple in, and Tubbo's close to stumbling into them by accident, so Ranboo pulls him against his side, offers the two a polite smile and then registers what he's seeing.

Dark flak jackets with red bars over navy jumpsuits, bright shine of gilded suns emblazoned on shoulders, pearly white blasters in holsters on their hips, and it's instinctual when Ranboo shoves Tubbo behind him, heart loud in his ears, jumping frantically in his throat but it's fine it's *fine, act normal Nirox doesn't care about the shipyard fire they won't know if you just act normal flash your IDs on a mission it's okay it's fine-*

But then one of them blinks in recognition, *no no no no no-* tan wings flaring behind them as they spit incredulously, "*U-Underscore?*"

They're crashing out the door the next second, Ranboo pushing Tubbo in front of him roughly, other hand dropping back to grab his blaster, snarls when he remembers he shattered the damn thing a few hours ago. The streets are finally cleared out now, sky going grey with an impending dawn, *nowhere to hide make easy targets*, and Ranboo curses everything that

ever claimed to be holy or sacred, distant cheery beep behind him, and then a muffled thump of a pair of massive wings taking off.

All the hair on the back of Ranboo's neck stands up, tail poofing out hearing the faint whine of a blaster about to discharge, lunges forward and wraps a fist in Tubbo's bomber, hauls him back as the asphalt gets hit a few feet in front of him, spiderweb of cracks exploding out. Tubbo stumbles but he's quick on his feet, pivots and darts down a side street, Ranboo hot on his heels, follows him as they wind further into Iziya, but there's boots thudding into the ground behind them and Ranboo pants, "H-Hey! Give m-me a *blaster!*"

"W-Where's yours?" Tubbo yells back, weirdly hasn't made a move to unholster either of his, and even though he's not as good a shot, he can still *shoot*, and Ranboo snaps, "I *broke it!* Now g-give me one!"

A dark shadow passes overhead, *the Niroxan*, and Ranboo jerks his hands up automatically, trying to take a shot with a blaster he doesn't have, barely manages to catch up to Tubbo as he wiggles in between two buildings, sprinting down a dingy back alley after him, "Tubbo-!"

"It's a criminal offense shooting at Sunfleet officers!" He yells like a *lunatic*, as if *laws* matter right now, and if they weren't currently trying to outrun these assholes, Ranboo would shake him roughly by the shoulders, has to settle for screaming, "Well they can't arrest *me if they're dead!*"

"No! We j-just gotta outrun'em!" Tubbo shouts, voice pitching up sharply in alarm as shots ring out, getting *distressingly* close to hitting them, and with an inarticulate snarl of rage, Ranboo has no choice but to speed down dew slicked asphalt. His lungs burn, boots slipping here and there but he's always been good at making hairpin turns, bounding over bags of trash and shimmying through tight gaps easily, trying to make sure there's enough cover overhead that the Niroxan can't get a clear shot.

A shower of small debris clatters into the back of Ranboo's neck, ozone thick in the air, ears ringing from the blast that struck the corner of the building they just ducked behind, came a hairsbreadth from being the side of *his head*. They may be able to outrun and outgun other bounty hunters and mercs, but pitted against *Academy trained soldiers*, it's *another thing entirely*.

Ranboo's basically been a civilian up until recently, Tubbo's only a quarter of a soldier, and with only two blasters between them, *both of which are not being used for some reason*, he's not liking their odds at the moment. If they're going to survive, they have to get out of here *now*, and gritting his teeth, Ranboo puts on a quick burst of speed, gets within grabbing range of Tubbo and yells, "Bo! *Jump!*"

It's a true testament to how much he trusts Ranboo that Tubbo does it without question, and as soon as his feet are off the ground, Ranboo snarls his claws in the back of his bomber and yanks them both into a teleportation jump.

Every young Ender gets taught the limitations of teleportation early, both at school and from hopefully their parents, so Ranboo *knows* he's not really supposed to make the jump with another person, but he doesn't have much of a choice. It *burns* like it's the first time he's

slipped through reality, gravity pressing on him so tightly, Ranboo wants to scream but can't, body locked up and frozen until they come tripping out into a pile of trash a few streets over.

His head *pounds*, bones creaky and hardly fitting together under his skin, and Ranboo barely scrabbles upright before he's retching, brain spinning from lack of oxygen, heart stuttering wild and out of time. Ranboo pants ragged, wipes his mouth against his sleeve and looks behind him when he hears groaning, sees Tubbo in a very similar position, one hand clutched at his head.

"S- s-sorry." Ranboo stammers, tries getting to his feet and collapses backwards, forces his shaking legs to bear his weight as he leverages himself up, "S-Shoulda...ugh...sh-shoulda warned'ya."

"S-S'okay." Tubbo slurs, pushing himself up as well, staggers forwards and has to lean heavily against a wall for support, and they could probably both use a second but they *don't have a second*. Ranboo is better at teleporting than a lot of other Ender, but he still can't go *that* far, the Sunfleet officers are going to find them unless they start moving, and Tubbo struggles upright, nods his head to the side, "C-Come on, Eshachi's this w-way."

They stumble through back alleys and side roads, trying to stay out of the line of sight as much as they can, and it's eerie and it's suspicious and it makes nerves roll down Ranboo's spine, when they get back to the Eshachi in one piece. Tubbo doesn't bother unloading any gear while the cargo bay doors seal shut, vaults up the ladder and Ranboo follows after him, unease boiling under his skin as he drops into his chair.

Tubbo is absolutely flying through the start up process, engines kicking on with a thunderous rumble, chews through a set of nails waiting on the computer to finish running it's start up diagnostic, and Ranboo nervously fiddles with the gun controls, doesn't want to ask what he knows they're both thinking.

*Dumb luck or not what are the odds they gave up what are the odds we're in the clear what are they odds we fly out of here no problem-*

But then he catches Tubbo's eyes and it's like electricity crackles through him, *we didn't escape we were let go there's going to be someone waiting*, and Ranboo starts powering the guns up right as Tubbo cranks the shields to full power.

"E-Ever had any combat flight training?" Tubbo asks shakily, a callback to the first time they flew together, hands flexing around the throttle and Ranboo's heart is pounding under his ribs, adrenaline spiking rapidly in his veins, but his hands are steady when he wraps them around the gunner controls, "Read a-a book on it once."

The laugh that echoes through the cockpit is a little nervous and bordering on unhinged, sick sense of excitement curling between them both, and Ranboo grins sharp with too many teeth as Tubbo pushes the throttle down, sending them lurching up out of the hangar.

Ranboo breathes in, Iziya speeding below them, *sharp eyes sharp mind can run calculations faster than they can breathe finger around the trigger never belonged anywhere else*, breathes out, the Eshachi singing her song for him as she climbs through the atmosphere, *fast ship*

*strong ship never failed us never failed her*, breathes in, hears the softest intake of breath as Tubbo does as well, *best pilot you've ever known born to fly born in that flight seat he's got your back and you've got his-*

-and the scanner starts beeping at them shrilly as he exhales, Tubbo already diving before any of the instruments tell him to, spinning to the side and cutting cleanly around a photon blast that rattles the Eshachi. He straightens back up and barely visible against the lightening sky are the cream white silhouettes of imperial luggers, back wings separated in attack position, sun shining blindingly off the golden crests etched into their hulls.

Ranboo doesn't think, fingers moving of their own accord, switching his control to the underwing guns, swings the yoke to the side and everything freezes for a second, reality stilled like he's paused it, overlay of ship trajectories flashing before his eyes, and he's got a clear shot, *he's got a clear shot*, depresses the trigger without a second thought.

But it goes wide, Eshachi suddenly pitching up and the photon blast rockets off into empty air, and Ranboo's in the middle of shouting in indignation as the comm line starts ringing, Tubbo yelling at him to shut up as he hits accept.

"Underscore you stupid fuck, stand down or we'll-"

"We're here on a mission, Ommot! You can't do shit!" Tubbo shouts back, and Ranboo boggles at him, because he is *seriously* trying to argue them down with the *legality* of the situation instead of shooting them out of the *void cursed sky*, "Under Article J-Ninety Six, any f-felon with para-imperial representation and proper cause cannot be-"

"Your warrants got bumped to higher priority, jackass!"

And Tubbo goes so still, Ranboo doesn't think he's breathing, stares out the viewport unseeing and *that's bad*, that's *really bad*. He needs to be *focusing*, and frantically, Ranboo reaches across the gaps in their seats and shakes Tubbo roughly, gets him to snap terrified eyes to him right as the comm line crackles back to life, "Now either *stand down*, or we'll have *proper cause* to shoot both you fuckers out of the sky! Do you hear me, Underscore? That make it into your stupid little *bug brain-!*"

They both move at the same time, Tubbo to swing the Eshachi back into a better position and Ranboo to take his shot, screaming incoherently as the Eshachi goes streaking forwards, turbines whining shrill and beautiful, underscored by the dull, rumbling bass of photon cannons discharging. The luggers are *fast*, they're sleek and built for speed, *for combat*, spiral out of the way, one going left the other right, and Tubbo slams a fist into the console, closing the call with a final, "GET *FUCKED!*"

He throws the throttle all the way down, flooding the engines with fuel, swings hard after the leftmost one, and Ranboo hasn't flown in a gunner seat for long, but he has some experience now, and he knows already that this is going to be a hard fight. Imperial luggers are the smallest manned craft that fly in the fleet, mostly run combat missions planetside, but even so, they're powered by End crystal reactors, making them faster, *deadlier*, than most any other ship they've flown against.

The Eshachi swerves after one and Ranboo flips over to the forward cannon in the hopes of taking it down with a single hit, knows this fight needs to be short if they have any chance. They're skating dangerously close to the tops of buildings, there's nowhere for the lugger to go so his shot will hit *is going to hit*, but then the lugger rockets up faster than Ranboo's ever seen another ship move.

It twists above them, and Tubbo swears vividly, jerking them to the side as a brilliant teal beam screeches past, alarms blaring wildly as it clips the shields, knocking them down a quarter with *one* hit. Ranboo tightens his hands around the trigger and hears the plastic grip protest, remembers to breathe and look for his next target, scanner to his right flashing wildly as it tries to keep up with the imperial craft.

Tipping the yoke to the left, Tubbo barrel rolls them around an incoming lugger, four guns on its wings blazing a scathing, *searing* teal as it roars past, sweeps to the side and into formation with the other ship, clear these two have flown together before based on how they move. These two pilots are good, Ranboo would be stupid not to acknowledge that, have the skills and training to make them formidable adversaries, but they lack raw talent.

The luggers split off again but it's intentional this time, and Tubbo dips quick as they come shrieking back around, basically flying full tilt straight at the ground, only pulls back on the yoke at the last second and reverses the throttle, sends them hurtling up and over the luggers in a dizzying spiral.

It's a move that'd send anyone else in a tailspin, unclear where the horizon line is, which end is up and which down, but Tubbo knows *exactly* how much to hit the throttle, the *exact* angle to twist the yoke, doesn't lose his head at all as vertigo pistol whips Ranboo *hard*.

He's still seeing stars but forces his head to clear, grins wide and feral as they come careening back down and there's a ship sitting pretty in his sights, finger tightening over the trigger, *so smart so good best pilot born in that seat born to fly love him love him so much*, takes the shot with a manic cry of laughter.

It hits, *it hits heady victory and elation and triumph it hit-* and slips harmlessly over the lugger's shields like water rolling off a waxed surface, and panic grips Ranboo tight, doesn't even get the chance to go for a second shot, hands rattled off the controls as the Eshachi is struck, deafening crack that sends them jolting to the side erratically.

"What the fu-!" Ranboo starts yelling over the wailing of alarms, but the words get stolen out of his lungs in sudden vertigo, sputter into choked off wheezing as the Eshachi rockets straight up and then violently backwards, another blast shaking the hull that only just *barely* missed.

*This is bad this is bad this is bad*, Ranboo thinks frantically, trying to pull extra power from the systems he can, but he's scraping the bottom of the barrel, takes a steadying breath and tries to *think*, there has to be a solution, *he just needs to find it*.

The luggers are hard to shake, *shields failing rapidly have about six minutes left*, hard to pin down, *fast so fast shouldn't be this fast limitless power unstoppable reactor the heart of the*

*fleet, keep dodging out of Ranboo's sights and he can't hit what he can't see, and he can't see what Tubbo can't catch.*

They've been in a lot of shootouts together, but the atmosphere has never been quite this *tense*, and Ranboo chances a glance at him, feels all the moisture leave his mouth seeing how pale Tubbo is, the stiff way he holds himself, teeth bared in a silent snarl.

When Tubbo really has to focus, he gets quiet, but he still shifts around a lot, antennae bobbing and weaving, wings flickering in excitement, and when he's *confident*, he cackles like a madman, hums and sings and wiggles in his seat, but Ranboo's never seen him *like this*, deathly still and tensed to the point that you can see all his tendons.

They dive and Ranboo whips his head forwards, catches the briefest snatch of the edges of Iziya as it bleeds out into more rural land, heart drumming loudly in his ears for different reasons when the Eshachi pitches to the side, not quite fast enough to dodge the blast that clips her right wing. Tubbo doesn't even react, and Ranboo realizes like a punch to the gut it's because he's *terrified* right now, is having to use everything he has to keep them from getting shot down, can't even take joy in the thing he was born to do.

For maybe the first time since he took them, the gunner controls shake under Ranboo's hands, shots going wide and unsure, overlays jittering in and out of focus, can't hit what he can't see, *can't hit them anyway not enough power nothing they can do they're helpless they're- t-they're not gonna ma-*

He snarls and tries to refocus his mind, *work damnit work think stop panicking think*, but the pressure only grows and grows, choking him off like hands cinched tight over his throat, *can't breathe can't think can't do it*, but this time, *they're gilded*, just like the insignia glinting in the sunlight smugly on the luggers' sides.

*All hail the Sun Empire, glorious and just, equality and progress for all-*

The Eshachi is a good ship, she's fast and she's strong and she's never failed them, but she's not *imperial*, her engines are as good as Tubbo can make them, but her tanks take fuel and not the perpetual exploding force of an End crystal trapped in stasis forever.

*-all those who know their place that is sit down shut up equivalent of a nuclear reactor pointed at your head-*

Ranboo hangs on to the armrests of his seat for dear life, doesn't bother with trying to shoot anymore because they're not trying to win, *they're trying to escape*, works on not throwing up, nothing in his ears but screaming alarms and the thunderous boom of photon cannons discharging, teeth rattling in his skull sick at the back of his throat has the horrible thought *they might not make it-*

*-wanna try me in every glittering shine of that crest you're not going to win whispers the voices of the conquered on the wind-*

The Eshachi is a good ship but she's not the best ship, her turbines can only spin so fast, her shields can only hold out so long, her pilot is incredible but he's terrified, her gunner can't



grab the ends of his spiraling mind, and in the end, like most things that stand against Nirox, that golden boot heel comes crashing down, forcing them into submission.

Ranboo thinks he hears Tubbo scream for him right before they make impact.

--

~~Lesson Ninety-Seven: Do not let them know what you've done would they even care know the answer~~

It's been six days and Ranboo still hasn't heard anything, *and you're not going to*, Reshaa reminds him helpfully and his hands start to shake.

The wind tugs at his hair.

It's been six days but Count Yorsho's son already got his letter, brought it to class to show off and Ranboo had sat at his desk and felt like he was sinking through the earth, falling into the very heart of it, pressures compounding until he was pressed out of existence.

The black stone is slick under his boots, is always slick despite being in a desert.

It's the sixth day he's come up here, *what's he even looking for anymore*, keeps edging closer to the parapets, *there's nothing out there*, for some reason, can't really breathe until he feels that cool air slap him across the face.

*It's because you need it*, Reshaa points out and she's right, *always have been little brother should've listened to me from the start*, and he knows and he's sorry and he's up here now, staring at Cyllelniad but seeing *nothing*.

And the wind *howls*.

Ranboo's arms shake where they're holding him up, claws slipping a little as he leans further out, wonders if he should get down, but then hands slide over his arms, cover his and lace fingers through them. *What's the point*, Reshaa coos, heavy weight across his back and Ranboo leans into the touch, so *desperate* to feel *someone* he'll even bother her for it, shudders as her fingers tighten around his own, *such a good boy know you're a bother a drain don't contribute anything, so, what's the point of getting down?*

"I could fall." Ranboo whispers but it doesn't sound like a rebuttal, *it sounds like a question-*

*And? Haven't you been thinking about it*, Reshaa laughs, hair spilling across his shoulder as she leans in, his ear flicking even though no breath ghosts against it, *do you really think anyone would care? Do you even think we'd notice?*

His feet jerk, can see the breakfast table reshuffled so the empty chair isn't noticeable, quarters given over to one of Reshaa's boys, place he sits in class quietly filled with another son of noble so and so, name stricken from the ledger, unadorned stone standing in the *memory garden hi mama-*

*Don't be ridiculous only members of the royal family are interred there and you're not anything, father demands don't won't never will look at him, strong line of his back and steel set to his shoulders, Daysetter crown imposing and authoritative across his head, you're not even the spare we don't need you we don't want you.*

*A ragged cry falls out of his mouth and it's- cutting palms open on mirror shards and cobras in his bed shouldn't have messed with me little brother syringe in his shoulder father looking disappointed when he trips in line which one are you again-*

*That's right you're so unimportant I can't even remember your name I let your siblings try and kill you I wish they would sometimes, father remarks easily and Ranboo sways violently, feels like the wind is threading through his hair, chases after its touch like a starving man, nothing will change if you take one more step no one will miss you how can you grieve nothing why would you ever mourn a shadow-*

*"Not there doesn't matter never did." Ranboo agrees in a mumble, can't remember which sibling told him that, they're all blurring together, running and spinning like Cyllellniad below him above him he doesn't know anymore which way is up which way is down is he falling is he flying should he find out?*

*Can't not yet waiting to hear from the Academy don't do this, something tries to speak up but it's drowned out by cackling skeletons, so many of them why are there so many why did you hurt them you know why rotten to your core corrupted thing poisoned fruit, sharp crack of a riding crop that makes him jump, feet coming back down unsteady but stable and for a second, he mourns-*

*Remember your duty to this family, Meleeri barks and Ranboo very nearly salutes her, but Reshaa has his hands wrapped up in place and father has a crushing hand on his shoulder and he can't move, oh but you can no way back only one way forward know what you have to do know what you're supposed to do can be a good son can do what your family wants you can make them proud-*

*"How?" Ranboo howls frantically, but his words are swallowed up in the wind, return to him in muffled silence and his breath is too loud and harsh, quiet raining deafening and grainy in his ears, and he screams desperate, "HOW!"*

Nothing answers.

*Nothing ever answers, and there's hands at his back through his fingers no way back no way out only way forward, and nothing answered him, nothing ever does you're alone you're no one you're nothing a mistake an accident a regret black mark on the ledger of your family take everything from them who are you again killed her made him miserable what do you do what do you do WHAT DO YOU*

*Come home, the skeletons shriek, claw and grasp at him from behind their doors, the ones he always tries to keep locked, sees desiccated faces and black blood slipping off boney fingers and they scream in laughter, come home come to us give in give up your turn now saved a spot for you down here know what you have to do-*

“W-What do I-! *WHAT DO YOU W-WANT!*” Ranboo wails, *and shaking they’re going to give out step back- NO NO NO NO DON’T GO ANYWHERE LITTLE BROTHER* *KNOW what you have to do-*

“I-I don’t! I-!”

*Yes you don’t lie to me boy can never lie to me taught you better than this raised you to be better you know what you have to do- and the parapets sway under his feet, vertigo spiraling up and making him dizzy, makes him feel weightless think he could fly if he tried-*

“Wh-What do you want f-from m-me?” He sobs and there’s a large palm wrapped around his shoulder, *grounding comforting kneeling down to eye level thumbing at the splotches under your eyes no rest for men like me men like us know what you have to do* *KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO-*

“I-I don’t! I- t-tell me! *PLEASE!*” Ranboo begs, so *desperate* to do what they want, to be a good son, hopes that maybe they’ll care for him then *if he could only do what they want and he’s good he knows how to behave he’ll do what they tell him he’ll h-he’ll-*

*JUMP*  
And he does.

Everything is suddenly gone, whipped out and away from him as he plummets over the edge, vertigo rushing in his ears, body empty and hollow and he’s scared- h-he’s *scared he’s scared oh Ancients oh no what has he done what HAS HE DONE-*

*Regret* howls through Ranboo stronger than the ripping, angry fingers of the wind, *what was he thinking what was he-* nothing freeing in tumbling wild and out of control through the air, *there’s no one here there’s no hands there’s no voices he’s alone he’s alone he’s going to die he doesn’t WANT TO-*

Freezing fire races up from his core and something solid hits him too soon and not soon enough, and it doesn’t hurt like it should, *like he wants it to he doesn’t want it to he doesn’t know he doesn’t know where he is who he is what he’s doing*, presses a fever hot face into freezing pavers and screams until he can’t anymore.

*Help me help me h-help me H-H-HELP M-ME*, Ranboo begs again and again and again but no one comes, and he curls up as small as he can get, heart roaring in his ears *or is it the wind come back come home come try again*, shakes and twitches like he’s still in freefall, *stomach dropping out from under him he’s going to be sick*, claws desperately at his arms trying to pull himself back over the ledge, *doesn’t work won’t work claws growing slick with blood*, feels like he’s stuck a hand in the black sand seas of the night and it’s taken him whole.

He doesn’t try to fight it, head slipping under inky particles, last thing he sees the cold light of the moon and the searing green of the auroras snapping overhead, the way they dip and spill across the sky almost like a great set of eyes contorting in pain, *don’t go please stay care for you care for yourself see the stars see me find me there not here I’m out there come find me don’t go please stay.*

*Okay*, he tells her but he's not sure he means it and the stars cry tears of glittering sorrow that night, rain down around him like soft particles of sand slipping away into the beyond.

Ranboo wakes up when the sun rises covered in sand and with blood all over his arms, stumbles down to the royal ring when the bells ring the morning meal and no one says anything.

He leaves his bloody clothes in a heap in his room, binds his arms and slips into his seat before father can comment and no one says anything.

There's a letter sitting on his plate and he slits it open with a shaking, broken claw, someone else using his voice to say the Academy has accepted him for the coming term, and no one says anything.

And when Ranboo goes back up to the roof later, sits near his dried blood stains, stares at the horizon without blinking until the sun sets, no one says anything.

There's no one there.

He starts to wonder if there ever was.

--

Ranboo's running out of cloth to use as bandages, has already gone through his shirt and his pants up to his knees, and that's bad that's-

*You might as well give up now there's no way you're beating me.*

-what's he thinking about again...oh, right. Bananas. *No*, no that's not right it starts with a B though, battalions bouillon buttercream bandanas, *bandanabanana*- cloth! Right he's running out of cloth he's-

*There's no need to be such a sore winner daughter. Now. Do you have any sixes?*

-six seven eight nine *focus*, he needs bandages. He needs bandages for uhuhuhhhhhh, *Tbubo Tobo T U B B O* who is very hurt and that's more important than sixes...sevens eights nines-

*Ha! Idiot. That was a stupid choice, now you have to draw. Go fish.*

-fish what's a fish where's a fish probably swimming in the murky brown water bad he doesn't like that doesn't like fish burns his hands no not fish that's stupid he's stupid what was he thinking about-

*What did I say about the braggadocio? Honestly you're impossible-*

-impossible...sounds familiar what's *impossible bright flashes of searing teal unstoppable force heart of the empire rattling screaming crash your name his name someone screams can't do it can't do it can't-*

*Still better than you old man so why don't you ki-*

“Will you two just- *shut up!*” Ranboo yells over his shoulder, and both father and Reshaa turn to look at him from around the boulder they have their cards spread out on. He tried kicking through the rock they were playing checkers on last time, thinking it was part of the hallucination, only to find out it was *very* real, and he and his toes have since been wary of whatever they huddle near.

*You could try asking nicely, Ran,* Reshaa complains and for some reason her hair is red today, *why is her hair red today red like fire red like flames red like B L O O D* *spilling down her face settling in the crook of his neck,* and his head pounds and reels and Ranboo hunches over, digs fingers into his temples and wants it all *needs it all to st o p-*

*-everything hurts the world sways smoke in his eyes stinging his lungs rattling grating cough dark ink flying out when he heaves light dancing it's hot it's hot IT'S HOT you're melting you're dying you can get out you can red red RED EVERYWHERE* *spilling down his face drip drip DRIP sizzle as it hits the fire he's hurt HE'S HURT he's stuck he's bleeding dying BURNING* *have to get out have to can't move legs don't work brain on F I R E-*

Eventually Ranboo comes to hunched over on the ground and something hurts, what hurts, *his throat hurts,* why does it hurt what's that noise, *screaming it's screaming,* what's screaming, *he's screaming,* and he finally hauls his mouth shut, bends down and presses his forehead into the warm earth and waits for the shakes to pass.

That's a joke that's a joke right, because the shakes don't stop, he's been shaking for...f-for-*for for for he can't remember what's happened where is he who is he what's happened his head hurts why does it hurt hands hurt skin hurts why does it hurt why does-*

There's the softest noise behind him but Ranboo whips around like someone screamed at him, and the world drops out from under his knees and *he remembers.* He scrabbles closer and has to force himself to clean his hands off, *no germs claws covered in dirt can't get him sick do it do it even though it hurts,* hissing as he dunks them in a container of the clearest water he could find.

Touching lightly at Tubbo's forehead shows he still doesn't have a fever which is good, *it's good means you're doing something right keep infection at bay,* but his face is screwed up in pain, *nothing you can do for him it kills you nothing you can do besides pet carefully through his hair and tell him you love him,* and very gently, Ranboo lifts the edge of one ragged, repurposed bandage.

It's bad, *it's really bad,* skin molted dark red and livid carmine, dried blood in rusty rivulets Ranboo can't clean, too terrified of touching Tubbo's open wounds with the nasty, murky water here, always a little cloudy even after he boils it. Tubbo whimpers again, shifting in discomfort, hard to find a position to lay that doesn't aggravate his burns, and Ranboo keens, reaching out with his other hand to thumb gently at his unmarked cheek.

“I know, amor, I-I *know.*” He sniffs, throat constricting tight with the threat of sobs, heart breaking into a hundred pieces as Tubbo cries out in his sleep again, turning into Ranboo's touch desperately, mumbling pathetically, “*Aiuto...a-aiutami...me dolet- m-me d-dolet-*”

*Help help me it hurts it hurts*, and Ranboo whines like his heart has been torn from his chest, carefully settles a cold hand over the bandages on his rightcheek, the chill he radiates enough to settle Tubbo at least a little bit. It's not clear how much Tubbo's really aware of right now, passing in and out of uncomfortable bouts of sleep, but given the severity of his burns, the broken arm Ranboo tried his best to set, he hopes for his sake, that he's not aware of anything.

*Wow...he looks like shit*, Reshaa comments, and thankfully, her hair is back to its natural black, folded up arms coming to rest along Ranboo's shoulders, but he shrugs her off, ears flattening to his skull as he snaps, "I'm doing my *fucking best*."

*Have you considered sucking less*, father asks where he's looming off to the left, apparently done playing Go Fish, and Ranboo groans, hangs his head and drifts in an angry sticky haze while bugs scream around him shrilly. This part of the planet is absolutely miserable, it's boiling hot and simmering with humidity, kept packed in close by all the choking greenery that spills out into waterways stagnant and dark.

Ranboo got them as far up onto dry land as he could get, but moisture still seems to collect on everything, beads off leaves and drips like liquid fire onto his skin, leaving little blisters behind that fade into dusty grey marks. Those'll disappear with time, superficial at most, but what Ranboo's really worried about are his hands, *has* to clean them off with something before he can tend to Tubbo.

There's no choice but the liquid that eats through him like acid, and he brings a shaking hand up, twists it back and forth in the dappled light and grimaces at how dry his skin looks, pale grey cutting off in uneven blotches right above his wrists, blisters at his fingertips from repeated dunkings. Ranboo's not a doctor, read every medical text he could get his hands on, sure, but he's not a *doctor*.

And he doesn't need to be to understand what chemical burns look like, can feel a loss of sensitivity past the searing heat when he presses trembling fingertips together, and it really is a tossup as to what's more distressing, how he's losing feeling in his hands or the way they won't stop shaking.

Holding his palm down flat, Ranboo tries to force his hand still but it tremors violently, *will they ever stop who knows he doesn't know how's he supposed to hold a blaster aim the triggers do anything*, curls numb fingers tight together and lets his arm fall, eyes drifting unthinkingly to the horizon because he *forgot*, and regrets instantly.

It didn't take him long to realize he had a concussion, but it took a while for Ranboo to *remember* he has a concussion, memories and thoughts slipping out through the cracks in his mind like sand through your fingers, and he always forgets the reality of what happened until he sees the dark shape- *little asskicker your home his home love her* -half submerged in bog water.

Black smoke still wheezes out, but it's slowed down a lot, gone from rapid exhales to sluggish, shallow breathing, fires mostly reduced to smoldering embers, but they've left their mark, *on you on him on her*. Sooty trails mar her hull, desaturate once vibrant paint, turbines

dark and lifeless where they'll always spin livid yellow and alive in his mind, snuffed out as soon as they made impact.

Parts of the hull are ripped open, metal curled and warped backwards from the intense heat of teal photon blasts, like a giant set of fingers have come along and raked gouges into her sides, exposing the delicate inner wirings. One wing is entirely buried under muck and stagnant water, the other is bent at a strange angle, *bird with a broken wing gonna sing for us nothing but screaming never a song*, so wrong to see something so proud and beautiful so beaten.

*Concrete stained dark with blood hastily mop it up like it doesn't matter like it's not a big deal like you weren't ever there-*

Ranboo swallows harshly, jerks his head away and wishes he could stop seeing it, what they did to her *what they did to you*, and an inquisitive hum swims over his head, *never thought I'd see you this choked up over a ship...what's the big deal? It's just a piece of machinery.*

"She's. *Not.*" Ranboo stresses, knees drawing up to his chin, tail coiled around scabbed over shins in a weak form of comfort, and thankfully, Reshaa doesn't push it, drifts past lazily waving a hand in the air, *whatever you say little brother, mourn and mope all you like, but it's not going to change anything.*

*She's right*, father points out, always a man of few words even when he's an imaginary specter that takes fucking Go Fish too seriously, *how do you plan on getting back?*

"I'm still working on it." Ranboo snaps like he's snapped for...f-for...*fuck*, he can't remember how long it's been, snarls one hand in his hair and yanks harshly, fist beating lightly into the top of his head because he's supposed to be better than this. He's the one that's supposed to know things, but ever since he woke up amidst smoke and flashing flames, his brain hasn't worked right, blanks out for whole stretches of time and can't control his body like it's supposed to.

His hands shake like a void cursed centrifuge, distances are hard to judge for some reason, and he's swung his face into several tree limbs now, couldn't make his legs bare his weight for a long while, but after enough screaming and death threats, they've decided to rejoin society as productive members, file their taxes and everything might even be saving up for a down payment on a- on a...

It has occurred to Ranboo on several occasions he might actually be going mad out here.

*Ranbooo I'm boooored*, Reshaa whines, looping through the air to hang in front of him upside down, ridiculous pout on her face and he swats at her, hand ghosting straight through but not deterring her at all as she asks, *can we play senet or something? You used to like that.*

"No because you're not real, *no* because you're *annoying*, and *no* because you *always cheat!*" Ranboo yells back and she sticks her tongue out, starts making high pitched, whiny noises that he copies immediately, only realizing after a beat he's interacting with a made-up construct of his eldest sister who abused him and tried to have him killed on multiple occasions, all while the impassive shadow of his uncaring father stares on unamused.

It has also occurred to Ranboo on several occasions he might actually already *be* mad.

In his defense though, there's not much else to do besides shamble around trying to find something to eat, and Ranboo would much rather be distracted by whatever stupid nonsense his brain puts on for him like he's a littling, than face the reality of what's happening.

Because the reality is this.

They're stranded in the rural wetlands of Shouko after being shot down by Imperial forces, the Eshachi is damaged so badly, Ranboo doesn't think Tubbo's going to be able to fix her, he has a concussion and can barely keep his fragmenting mind together, Tubbo has severe burns and a broken arm, and the fact that he hasn't gotten an infection yet is a fucking miracle.

They do not have any food besides what Ranboo can scavenge, all raw tubers and fruits he's seen local wildlife eating, and at least Tubbo can drink the water here, but Ranboo hasn't had anything besides berry juice in- *Ancients*, he doesn't know how long, keeps losing track of days and forgetting to make tally marks.

They don't have any way to contact someone, Ranboo's handheld is busted, Tubbo's doesn't have any reception, also predictably died about five minutes later, and if Ranboo hadn't been so terrified, sitting alone in the dark with his husband sobbing from burns he had no way to soothe, Ranboo would've laughed because that just figures doesn't it.

And the reality of the situation is they're going to die out here, no one knows where they are, and Ranboo's either going to die of dehydration watching his cariad writhe in pain, or Tubbo's going to succumb to his injuries and Ranboo will be two seconds after him.

His eyes drag haltingly up to where Tubbo's sprawled out, head pillowed on Ranboo's jacket, sweat beading along his brow and face screwed up, teeth digging into his lower lip, and it kills Ranboo to see him like this now, but it's actual torture when he cries out in *agony*, begging for it to stop, pleading for someone to help him, for his mother, for Tommy, *for Ranboo*.

It's a special and terrible kind of hell to sit there and watch the love of his life suffer so unimaginably, helpless to comfort them or ease their pain, knowing there's nothing he can *do about it*, and maybe for the first time in his life, Ranboo thinks about his father and feels pity.

"How did you handle it, when mom was..." Ranboo doesn't finish the thought, *can't*, digs his claws into his arms and turns to look at the ghost of his father, and the specters only know what *he* knows, they can't answer questions like this, but father looks at him dead and hollow, *house with the lights out molted husk no rest for men like me*, and says way to honest for Ranboo's liking, *I didn't*.

Ranboo swallows harshly, can't look away and can only think about, *stepping back stepped away was guarded from the day you were born but after she died it was like he shut off what was that even like what would you even do if it was you if Tubbo died here and you had to go on without him easy you wouldn't-*



But he just has himself, *he doesn't have eight children no not going there we're NOT-* and the lack of anything in those transparent green eyes is unnerving enough it prompts Ranboo to his unsteady feet, *he has to get out of here.* Ranboo sways for a minute, sure his fractured mind is about to dump him back on his ass, but he bends his knees and stays upright.

Just maintaining balance feels like victory, and past the spots swimming in his vision, Ranboo points at the blackened shell of the Eshachi and announces pointlessly, "Imma go check for supplies since...s-since it's uh...ya'know...not um...h- *hoooot?* Anymore? *Fire.* I- It's not on fire."

*Look for a senet board,* Reshaa demands lazily, drifting in figure eights over their little makeshift camp, and like he's done most of his life, Ranboo ignores her, focuses on a spot where the Eshachi's wing is mostly level and makes his jump.

Ranboo typically uses coordinates instead of needing to see where he's going, *only children relied on sight alone,* but with how fucked his brain is right now, he doesn't trust it not to try and teleport him halfway across the planet, which would only succeed in killing him instantly.

He lands shaky on his feet, stumbles forwards and barely manages not to fall head-first off into brackish waters because he remembers to throw himself backwards. Ranboo hits sun warmed metal with a groan, and lays there panting for a second while he gathers his bearings. There's a huge gap in the trees here where they crashed through, probably looks like a nasty, ugly scar from the air, and Ranboo spreads a discolored hand across the Eshachi's battered hull, wonders how long they're all going to have to bear these marks.

*You know the answer to that one,* and Ranboo pushes himself up with a sigh, shuffles over to the cracked viewport, mindful of not cutting his bare feet on shards of borosilicate glass scattered around. He looks down into the shadowed interior of the cockpit, can still see things smoldering here and there, but the embers flash and it's- *fires roaring thick noxious smoke clouds everything your head is reeling there's blood everywhere throws jumping shadows across his face lick at his skin he's going to die unless you. GET. HIM. OUT-*

Ranboo collapses to his knees gasping for air, hand coming up to clutch at his throat, can't think, *where are you where is he what happened where is he where is he WHERE IS HE,* screams until he can't, *have to get him out legs don't work where's the ground brain doesn't work everything's on fire,* screams until the smoke is out of his lungs and he knows things again.

He bangs a fist into the viewport, sobs because none of this is fair, they're good people they didn't deserve this, *stand down or we'll shoot you down,* but it happened anyway, and Ranboo howls exhausted and frustrated and *scared how fragile he feels in your arms screams in pain his skin is red red red like blood like flames like your horrid eye your fault your fault your-*

*Oh darling oh dear one I'm sorry I'm so sorry it shouldn't have happened not to you not to him,* a soft voice whispers on the wind and looking up through hazy eyes, Ranboo sees his mother crouched next to him, but instead of horns, she has curly antenna, hair bound back in

a messy plait, but she smiles at him like sunrise and he whispers broken, “*M-Mama- I-I’m s-scared-*”

*I know but you have to be strong if you want to live if you want him to live don’t have to go alone don’t have to be alone*, she promises, holding out a hand in offering, and Ranboo hesitates, but he does thread his fingers through her starlight ones. Warm comfort leaches out where they touch as he takes a deep breath, *it’s okay you’re okay I’m here always here dear one Ranboo my darling my littlest*, and he jumps them down into the scorched remains of the cockpit.

The first thing Ranboo does is buckle and dry heave, rotted scent of copper thick in the air and acrid smell of burning electrical parts, doesn’t want to know if the dark sludge under his feet is coagulated blood or bog muck. Mother combs through his hair while he shudders, singing her lullaby gentle and sweet and eventually, Ranboo hauls himself back up, takes her hand again and forces his feet forwards.

They poke around the Eshachi hand in hand, and it’s not as bad as Ranboo feared it would be, there’s soot over everything but they wipe it clean, her glittering hand over his burned one, find parts are still okay underneath. He manages to unearth the med kit, hugs it to his chest like it’s made of gold, and keeps it latched tight in his other hand while he tries to find food next.

Probably in response to the crash, or because the wiring got fried, but the cargo hold sealed itself off, and without power, there’s no way Ranboo’s getting in there unless he teleports. Most of their emergency supplies are stored down there, but he’s too scared of making a jump he can’t see right now, hangs his head in defeat until mother hushes, *it’s okay that’s okay you’re allowed that darling know what’s best don’t hurt yourself he wouldn’t want you to get hurt take care of yourself*.

“I- okay.” He whispers and when she smiles, it’s like the promise of a better tomorrow, and he turns to rummage through their room instead, hates how eerie it is back here. The bunkroom is small, two beds wedged under bulkheads that Ranboo can’t fit on, and neither side has ever been his nor Tubbo’s, used to be decorated with bits and pieces from their travels that now lay scattered and damaged across the floor.

Soot stains blacken the walls, pieces of the hull have buckled in a few spots, looks like the place has been ransacked, and over it all, like the cruelest mirage, images flicker and waiver and it’s him and Tubbo sitting and playing cards, braiding one another’s hair, listening to music with a shared set of earbuds.

It’s them happy and safe and *how it’s supposed to be*, and not...and not *this- blackened and battered possessions everywhere their home violated forced into submission made to kneel-*

“I hate this...” Ranboo mumbles, slouched against the doorframe and swallowing past the horrible lump in his throat, tips his head to rest on mother’s arm as she pets through his hair, fingers gentle with the bead he thankfully still has.

Light filters in past them, throws a long, dark shadow out before Ranboo, the shape of him visible on the back wall, pointed ears and lone horn, boxy shape of the med kit in one hand,

and...*and nothing in the other.*

Ranboo raises his right hand, the one mother is holding, can see her fingers wrapped through his clear as day, but the shadow just twists its empty hand in the air. He knows she's not real, *she died so long ago has been a ghost longer than you ever knew her*, but all he can think about is how deranged he must look half the time, talking and interacting with things that aren't there.

For some reason, it just hits then, how abnormal he actually is.

The med kit clangs loudly against the floor as it slips out of Ranboo's slack fingers because *what is wrong with him she was right, Reshaa, the real one the one that hates him, she was right he is crazy he is actually insane he is so wrong and so broken insides blackened and scorched out nothing worth saving he should be medicated he should be locked up he should be de-*

*Stop it*, mother demands and Ranboo's very nearly cowed by it, and she's not *real*, but it feels real when she tugs on his hand, aurora eyes burning into his as she begs, *stop hating yourself you are a flawed being but you are still deserving of life please don't waste it hating yourself.*

"I-" He tries to say but mother cups his cheek as shooting stars pour down out of her eyes, *you are loved Ranboo, the universe has loved you from the moment it brought you into existence and you remember it when you take pride in yourself, when you find joy in the way air fills your lungs and the earth moves under your feet.*

It's knowing answers to riddles without really having to try, it's appreciating steady hands and fast eyes, seeing a score no one else has managed to achieve and knowing *he* did that, it's sitting watching light shift outside big windows, warm hands tracing over his skin and relishing the simple pleasure of *living-*

*You hear it in the quiet moments when he tells you he loves you*, mother murmurs, drawing closer, glittering tears tracing glowing shapes around the somber smile she gives him, *you see it in his eyes you see it in your own when they trace across the heavens overhead and don't you get it Ranboo, don't you get it dear one.*

Ranboo can't breathe, remembers every instance of staring at the sky, at the great infinite reaching arms of the beyond and being filled with such *longing* and *reverence* he didn't know what to do with himself, and mother laughs overjoyed, *every time you look up at the stars at the universe and love, you're loving yourself you are the universe and the universe is you stardust in another form eternity at your core.*

She leans down, brings their foreheads together, and Ranboo slips his eyes shut automatically, head dizzy and starved for air, electricity crackling through his nerves, heart thundering under his ribs as mother hushes, *you are loved because you are love don't ever forget that darling.*

A sob bubbles out of his throat when he feels her lips brush against his brow in a kiss, but once Ranboo opens his eyes, she's gone *he's alone*, presses a hand into his chest, right where

his heart beats, and every thud of it sounds like the sibilant call of, *I love you I love you I love you I love you*.

“I-I love y-you too.” Ranboo whispers back shaky, arms wrapping tight over his chest like a hug, feels the way it expands under him as he breathes, the deep rush of his pulse and comfort his own touch brings, and for once, he thinks he is just actually talking to himself.

Something tickles at his ears then, low, bass vibrations and high pitched whines that sound so familiar, Ranboo chalks it up to painful, wishful thinking at first, knows there’s no way the Eshachi’s engines could be running right now, but the sounds just keep getting *louder*.

*No not possible hearing things nothing new but what if*, and he stumbles to the front of the Eshachi, hardly daring to breathe, *to hope*, but a shadow passes over the viewport and even through the shattered glass, he can see trees waving erratically, branches snapped into a frenzy by low flying turbines.

Ranboo’s on top of the Eshachi the next second, head rushing and dizzy, can’t believe his stupid, impossible luck, and squints against the blinding light of the sun trying to spot the other ship, doesn’t matter who it is, but he’s *going* to flag them down even if it’s the void cursed Sunfleet.

But then when he sees dark grey intercut with burnt orange, fiery red lines outlining a symbol that has only come to mean *refuge*, Ranboo sinks to his knees, laughing so hard he’s crying, crying so hard he’s laughing, tips his face up and feels the sun strike across his skin, sucks in a deep breath of air, and lets it go in boundless relief.

And the reality of the situation is this.

The Eshachi is broken not dead, sent out a distress signal right before she lost power, and it took them three days to find the two of them but Techno refused to leave until he did, and Tubbo is hurt but he’ll live, Ranboo’s alive, *is going to stay alive*, and they’re going to be okay.

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**Lesson Seven: The family is more important than the individual ~~but who are you without them~~**

He goes to the Academy, he doesn’t tell anyone what happened, he lives with the voices of his family screaming at him to try again and life moves on.

He and his siblings grow up, they mature past leaving cobras in one another’s beds, instead, transition to undermining each other in their career fields. Ranboo doesn’t have a career yet, but he’s already exhausted thinking about it, having to deal with all their shit while he tries to manage affairs for the family off planet.

That’s what he’s decided he’s doing with his life, he’ll serve in the senate here on Nirox, represent Voidfall and Annwyl at large, and when he comes home after the first semester, tells Meleeri what he’s chosen, she actually smiles at him.

“A worthy choice, my prince.” Is what she tells him, but Ranboo knows what she *really* means, *good boy taught you well the family comes first you come never finally learned your place*, and he doesn’t smile back at her.

Ranboo goes to his classes and scores well, he thinks he makes friends and he loses them, gets a new set for personal appearances that he holds at arm’s length, and they him, spends any free time he has camped out alone on the top of his dorm staring at the stars.

*Wishing.*

He’s not sure what for, a way out maybe, a life he’s not sure he’s allowed to have, to dream about even, so he sits up there alone and wishes he wasn’t.

Being on Nirox is the first time Ranboo’s been away from his family and it’s...strange, he doesn’t know what to do with himself half the time, is so used to someone else being around telling him what to do where to go what to wear, but now, there’s no one.

He stares dead into mirrors and doesn’t know who he’s looking at, walks out his door with nothing in his head and a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes and doesn’t know what he’s doing, spends his days reading books about stuffy complicated politics, field guides tucked under the slats of his bed and doesn’t know where he’s going.

Sleep won’t come to him there’s black bloody bandages too many coffees with extra espresso and it feels like he’s in free fall sometimes, slipping past a life that doesn’t feel like anything more than an elaborate game of pretend, and at this point, Ranboo doesn’t know who he’s trying to trick anymore.

He thinks it might be him.

“The uprisings in the Korton sector have made travel to Nirox riskier than usual, my prince, so other means of transportation have been arranged. I apologize for any inconvenience.” The aide says at a fast clip and Ranboo doesn’t really care, knows in actuality, it’s probably some bullshit reason Zethir’s come up with to try and take his pride down a peg.

*You shouldn’t have started that rumor her daughter is a bastard*, father reprimands as Ranboo swings his bag over his shoulder, is just waiting for this new research guide to finish downloading and then he’ll be ready to leave, rolls his eyes and scoffs back, *well she shouldn’t have tried to get my political science professor to fail me*.

Once the guide has downloaded completely, Ranboo gathers the last of his things and strides ahead of the bitchy aide, only paying half attention after the man mentions, *Syndicate pilot and surely won’t be too much of an embarrassment and but I’m sure you’re accustomed to that*, irritation growing because this reeks of Zethir and her snide ways at destroying reputations.

*She’s got a conference coming up see if you can tweak the audio ruin her big presentation*, Ranboo thinks, already working on the chain of who he has to go through to get that done, lost in thought as they make the jump out to the landing pad and then promptly forgets his sabotage plans.

Because arching overhead are the sleek, refined lines of a dangerous looking ship, unarguably graceful with the way its wings are angled, paint lines crisp and sharp, might actually be beautiful, and standing in front of it has to be the pilot, gossamer wings shaking in the freezing temperatures, two sets of arms huddled close to stay warm, *Mellifera*, Ranboo's mind supplies.

And the pilot twists to face them, wind blowing the hair out of eyes as dark as the sky overhead, like the navy velvet between the stars on Nirox, light from nearby End crystals reflecting in their inky depths, and there's color on his cheeks, tip of his nose, and Ranboo's heart jumps painfully as everything around him comes into startling focus when the pilot smiles, twin dimples in his cheek.

It's like looking at everything he never knew he wanted.

"Nice to meet you Ranboo, I'm Tubbo, your pilot."

~~you think you wanna find out~~

--

The melted fraying wire is super obvious even without the magnifying goggles, and in times like these, Ranboo is really glad he has claws, slips one in and wiggles the coil of wire out easily. He's pretty sure there's no powercell in the blaster but- *it's always good to double check Tech will kill me if you blow your hands off* -and so Ranboo does, *nope he remembered good job junebug*, before snipping out the section of broken wiring.

Switching his goggles over to welding mode, Ranboo starts splicing in the new piece of wire, gets the ends soldered on nicely and takes a second to be proud of himself, *steady hands good job*, humming under his breath as he replaces the rubber casing with something more protective.

Ranboo's slipping the metal housing back into place when the workshop door swishes behind him, and he spins on his stool, flipping his goggles up to greet happily, "Morning! How're you?"

"I'm good! You sure are chipper this morning, good day?" Puffy asks with a smile, swings her bomber off and hangs it up on a peg next to his, and Ranboo nods excitedly, holds a hand out for her and it's mostly steady, "Look! Hardly any shakes."

"Hey that's awesome, Ranboo!" Puffy enthuses, big, fluffy ponytail bouncing as she gives him an over exaggerated thumbs up, and when she grins, it scrunches her nose up, which she hates but Ranboo's told her multiple times is very endearing.

"Thanks." He says a little sheepish, scoots his legs out of the way for Puffy to have room to wiggle past, and she pulls out the stool next to him, "Of course, junebug! How're you doing today? Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

Ranboo likes Puffy, she's fatally optimistic but not in a fake way, genuinely believes things will work out for the better, that everything has a chance. Maybe that's why she enjoys

working at the repair shop so much, can take pieces of equipment other members have written off as a lost cause and breathe new life into them.

“Hmm, I’m okay. I actually got some sleep last night, which was nice...probably why my hands aren’t that bad today.” Ranboo allows, rolling a screwdriver across the pitted surface of the worktable, doesn’t really like the off grey color his fingers are now, but he can feel the grooves on the screwdriver’s handle, and it’s *something* when he was scared he was going to have nothing.

“That’s good to hear! Regular sleep is good for healing concussions, but every little bit helps.” Puffy says as she pulls her own tray of broken things forwards, starts rummaging around in it but holds up a finger in his direction, voice firm and affectionate, “Few hours here, few hours there, all good and valid. Remember, progress is progress.”

Puffy has a habit of mothering things, dysfunctional equipment dysfunctional Syndicate members, probably why she made captain relatively young, took good care of her crew and her ship while she flew under the Sunlight banner, was proud of her golden bars and the suns on her shoulders until they told her to aim her guns at civilians.

“Progress is progress.” Ranboo repeats easily, spinning on his stool back to the blaster he’s almost done with, just a few more adjustments and it’ll be ready to go in the bin marked ‘*Better :)*’ in a bubbly hand, so much kindness in that one word alone he smiles a little.

Puffy’s a good person, she’s gentle and she cares so much for everyone around her, it’s a little staggering, and when they told her *orders are orders sit down shut up do as you’re told*, she turned her guns back on Nirox and they branded her a traitor for it.

“I always did like pirates when I was a kid.” Puffy told him the first time they met, when Ranboo’s ears still rang with the horrible shrieking *sickening crash*, and he couldn’t hold anything steady, but she took him by everything in the workshop still, explained what each item was and how to use it.

“I-I don’t t-think I’ll be much help...” Ranboo had tried to explain and Puffy had drug out the second stool with her foot, patted it roughly until he went to sit down, smiled at him with a scrunched up nose and wiggling ears, “Keep me company then, junebug! That’s help.”

So Ranboo did, got up in the mornings and went to go learn how to fix things, and sometimes they didn’t talk and sometimes they did nothing *but* talk, sit on the dusty floor of the workshop and pass a bag of gummy candy back and forth. It’s incredible how she does it, *he doesn’t know how she does it*, but Puffy manages to wind out pieces and parts of a story Ranboo’s never told anyone, doesn’t make it seem like a big deal when he’s lying on the floor telling her he threw himself off the palace one day.

“I’m not a professional, by the way, I just...like to help.” Puffy says after Ranboo’s done telling her about Reshaa, and he’s drawing shaky, ugly pictures of a combustion chamber on his arm, but freezes thinking about *needles taking him to the floor long hospital tables too much medication and deaf ears*, swallows rough.

“I-I...I don’t want a-a *professional*...r-right now.” Ranboo croaks, has to remind his hand to move again and finishes off his drawing with a sigh, it’s kinda terrible, the lines are wobbly and sloppy but it’s *something*, and he looks up at Puffy unsure, “Um, I just...want s-someone to talk to.”

She shuffles a little closer, bumps their shoulders together and minds her curling horns as she leans in, holding out the bag of gummies, “I can do that.”

They work on fixing the broken things their coworkers bring them, sometimes Puffy talks about the empire, *suffocating pressure unimaginable agony vicious glee taking their ships down before they got her*, sometimes Ranboo talks about Voidfall, *dark soaring hallways and snapping fans and casual homicide*, and if it ever gets too much, he can turn his shaking hands to something real and tangible and actually *fix it*.

The unintentional symbolism isn't lost on Ranboo, but so what if he needs such an overt metaphor, it’s beyond gratifying to take something everyone else has written off and repair it, makes him feel better about himself. His hands may be discolored now, *nothing we can do about the scarring can try and repair damaged nerves sorry kid*, but he’s getting feeling back every day and that’s something to be happy about, the shakes come and go as his head heals but they’ve been going more and more.

Sleeping is still hard, still has Ranboo waking up in a tangled fit of sheets and frantic breathing, thinking he’s *back there*, pinned under something heavy that he can’t get out *that he can’t get to Tubbo flames roaring around him have to get them out can’t let him die can’t let him burn*.

Realistically, the nightmares are never going to stop haunting him, but Ranboo’s well versed at picking reality from illusion, can count his breaths and draw mechanical blueprints overflowing with flowers until the world straightens out. It’s an imperfect process, but most days, Ranboo feels okay, can at least sit up on the observation deck with Ozzi and watch the stars spin past, press a hand over his heart and feel, *I love you*, beating under his palm.

Ranboo clicks the last piece back into place on Rohko’s blaster, sets it in the ‘*Better :)*’ box and makes a note on his timesheet for how long the repair took, pen scratching to a halt as the unsure question eases out between them, “How’s um...how’s Tubbo?”

*Boxes of parts hurled at the wall wrenches crashing down over and over again hands fisted in hair screaming himself hoarse breaking glass and sliver thin cuts weeping ruby red blood spills down his cheeks like tears get out get OUT LEAVE ME ALONE-*

“U-Umm...” Ranboo starts and then doesn’t know where to go, how much he should say, *slipping over the edge I keep reaching for him and I’m terrified because he won’t reach back*, stares at the mottled pattern on the backs of his hands and whispers, “He...h-he didn’t come back last night.”

“Do you...know where he is?”

And Ranboo swings an unimpressed look at her because *everyone* knows where Tubbo is, has to so they can avoid that repair bay like the plague, wary over getting their heads bitten off



simply from walking through the wrong door.

“Riiiiight.” Puffy drawls, absentmindedly playing with the trigger on the welding tool, sets the torch down and taps the pads of her fingers together and apart, a weird little gesture she’s picked up from Ranboo, “Do you...think it would help if I-?”

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea.” Ranboo sighs, reaching up to fiddle with his braid that he’s had to redo himself for the last week, rest of his hair tied off and out of the way, “He’s um...h-he’s private a-about stuff, just...u-unless you’re ya’know, *f-family*.”

Well that *used* to be true at least, but at the moment, Ranboo’s having trouble getting Tubbo to talk to *anyone*, spends more time messaging *his* mother and best friend than actually speaking with him either. All three of them care for him more than anything, but they’re all failing at getting him to see it, nothing they do helping to pull him out of this pit he’s fallen into.

There’s a light touch at his arm and Ranboo swivels to see Puffy smiling at him sympathetically, warm, calloused fingers curling gently over his forearm, “I’m sorry, I know how rough this probably is watching your life part- *uh*, s-sorry! I um- I-I’ve never asked but are you two like...?”

“We’re married.” Ranboo clarifies quickly to put Puffy out of her misery, and she hangs her great, shaggy head of hair and blows out a sigh of relief. It looks like it takes a second for what he said to actually sink in, but once it does, her ponytail whips around like wild as she swings her head up not a second later, eyes shining beautifully, “Oh, what’m I-! *Congratulations!* Sorry, I didn’t say anything sooner, I didn’t know.”

Ranboo laughs a little at that and reaches his free hand up to twiddle his braid in her direction, not like he hides it or anything, but Puffy doesn’t look like she understands at first, confused set to her face that clears up as her brows lift, “Oh! Is that like...an Ender marriage thing? O-Or Apian? I haven’t known many Ender or Mellifera soooo...”

“It’s Ender, Mellifera wear matching earrings.” Ranboo says, something he’s learned from his recent studies in Apian, which is...odd actually, that this is the first time he’s heard about it, and not even from Tubbo. *Probably just personal preference might not want his ears pierced*, Ranboo thinks while Puffy makes appropriate cooing noises at his bead, but he’s too lost in thought to really respond well, *still strange though...knows how much you like earrings and yet...why hasn’t he...*

He’s quiet the rest of the morning, finishes up his work and with a quick glance at his new *new* handheld, *several missed messages but none he’s been waiting on not good*, Ranboo starts packing up, tells Puffy he’ll see her tomorrow. She smiles and waves him off, only calling his name before he’s out the door, flips her goggles up and accidentally smudges grease across her temple, “Hey...let him know I’m here- *we all are*, if he needs us...for *anything*, okay?”

“I will, thanks, Puffy.” Ranboo says with a soft smile, shrugs his bomber over his shoulders, flips his ponytail out of the collar and steps into the front of the repair shop. The lobby is

decently busy, but Ranboo still fist bumps Ellov who's working behind the counter today on his way out, waves at the people that call after him with friendly greetings.

*Hey Ran thanks for fixing my blaster for fixing my handheld for tweaking this for repairing that bright smiles and sincere eyes you're good you're so talented nothing you can't do, and it's nice hearing it all, it's nice being here,* Ranboo stopping to chat where he can, never stays long, hyper aware of the time and always leaves with the same excuse everyone's come to expect from him.

It's close to lunch so the central hub is busy, cafeteria bustling as people try and grab a quick bite before flying out or before they get some shuteye, and Ranboo weaves through the crowd easily, fingers tapping an uneasy rhythm against one another. The kitchen is blissfully quiet when Ranboo slips inside, dull droning of the lights overhead something of a balm as he fishes leftovers out of the fridge, sets the dish in the microwave to heat up and idly checks his missed messages.

### **Cissan**

9:43

>> Buongiorno crurito! Spero bene tibi discis hoy. Giulia brought me the last of the season's sunflowers and it made me think of you. Let Bo know I'm thinking of him too, and that he matters so incredibly much. I know you're taking good care of him melli, I just worry.

>> Stay safe and hopefully we'll see each other soon!

>> Benson says buongiorno as well!

[attached is a picture of Benson with his head propped up on Cissan's knee looking very putout and very adorable]

12:10

<< Pomeriggio! Comi agis? Sonos buono! Thank you for thinking about me, that's very sweet of you, and also thank you for the esoni soup recipe. I must have done an okay job making it cause he had a whole mug of it last night.

<< Hope to see you again soon! And please give Benson lots of pats from me.

### **Tommy Innit**

11:32

>> hey just chekcin in again

>> hes still not messaging me back

>> just wanna make sure hes breathing I guess

12:15

<< Hey sorry I had work.

<< I'm getting ready to take him lunch now.

>> ayup

>> ur a swell dude

<< I try.

Ranboo really doesn't know what else to say, *never has any idea what to say to Tommy they've never even spoken in person only thing they share on the brink of crisis*, is thankfully saved from that spiral of anxiety when the microwave dings, tucks his handheld away to grab the steaming dish. He fits the lid back in place, makes sure to bring a couple spoons and water bottles before catching the lift down to the lower decks where the hangars are.

There's eight hangars in total, lowest ones the oldest and are hardly ever used besides for doing repair work, but that's where Ranboo's headed. He steps onto a crowded lift, but after he's passed hangar two, he's the only one left, taps his claws into the plastic dish as the doors crank open, dropping him off in an absolutely deserted landing bay.

The far end of the hangar is a huge dark gaping maw, prickle of stars in the far distance only thing to show it's not just a hole through reality, forcefield glowing vibrant orange around its edges keeping the vacuum of space at bay.

All of the landing spots are empty down here, most of the repair bays open as well, shuttered doors rolled all the way up, but there's one that isn't, and Ranboo starts in that direction, ears flicking when he catches the grating, bass boom of music cranked up too loud.

Whatever's playing is a good general indicator to the mood for the day, ranging from sullen sulking to waspish responses to one rare time he got a genuine smile, but the beat thundering out from under the rolling bay door is the same one that was playing when an entire glass dish was frisbeed at a wall.

*Good luck maybe he'll hit you this time*, Reshaa cackles and Ranboo frees a hand to flip her off, but otherwise ignores her, uses that same hand to pound on the garage door, raises his

voice even though he knows Tubbo's not going to hear him, "Tubbo! *Lunch!*"

If anything, the music gets louder, and with a deep sigh, Ranboo crouches down and pries the rolling door up one-handed, lifts it enough to duck under and lets it clang closed behind him. The music is *impossibly* loud in here, makes his teeth rattle and his ears cringe in pain, folding as close as they can get to his skull in an attempt to muffle it.

Resting in the center of the repair bay is the Eshachi, looking better every time Ranboo sees her, hull scrubbed clean of soot and bog muck, pale grey patches where the tears have been mended and are just waiting for a fresh coat of paint. Her wings have been reset into proper place with the huge mechanical arms that come out of the walls, folded back now since there's no more heavy lifting repairs, just finicky electrical work and replacing internal parts.

It's not immediately apparent where Tubbo is. Any sound he's making is muffled by the angry thudding of his music, and Ranboo has to clear space on a worktable to set the soup down, pushing past messy piles of parts and tools, nothing organized correctly. Some little bolts ping to the floor and he drops to catch them, grimaces seeing the mound of paper coffee cups and crushed energy drink cans clustered by the table's legs.

"Tubbo!" Ranboo has to yell as loud as he can, throat constricting painfully but still barely makes it above the racket blasting around him, straightens up and circles the Eshachi looking for any glimpse of his husband. He eventually finds him at the back of the ship straddling one of the engines, maintenance hatch flipped back while he pokes at the insides with a nasty glower on his face, wrench in one of his lower hands, other in a sling.

Thankfully, the song's winding down and Ranboo takes his chance, cupping his hands around his mouth as he shouts, "TUBBO!"

His head snaps up and even from here, Ranboo can see the dark circles under his eyes, pale cast to his face, cheeks gaunt and hollow, and used to be, when Tubbo looked at him, he'd smile, eyes crinkling up in a wonderful grin, but now he just glares, snapping, "I'm busy. *What?*"

"I brought lunch, come eat." Ranboo calls, tries to be quick because he can hear the next song roaring to life, just as loud and furious as the one before it, and with a roll of his shoulders, Tubbo turns back to the engine and flaps a hand at him, "Not hungry. Leave it."

"Tubbo I'm not- h-hey are you even-! TUBBO! Hey!" Ranboo yells over the thundering screaming of the next song, tail lashing behind him angrily as he moves closer in an attempt to get Tubbo to pay attention to him, "*TUBBO!* You have to eat! A-Are you *listening?* I just-I-I'm trying to have a- will y-you just- TURN THIS *DOWN?*"

"Don't like it fuckin' *leave then!*" Tubbo bitches back, perhaps applying a bit too much force to whatever he's working on, and Ranboo can't hear the part break, but he sees the way Tubbo's arm suddenly jerks back and the vicious snarl that curls his lips. It's second nature at this point to step under the Eshachi for safety, blurry shape flying into the back wall with a sharp clang, the wrench Tubbo was just holding clattering to the floor as he drops off the side of the ship.

He stalks past all tense shouldlers and balled up fists, won't even look at Ranboo when he ducks under the wing, just heads straight for his worktable, and it feels like someone has his heart in a death grip. Ranboo trails along cautiously after him, eyes the back of his grey tank as Tubbo picks through the absolute disaster the tabletop is, thoroughly and completely ignoring the soup set out for him.

Every line of his body screams *anger* and *frustration*, muscles tensely wound to the point it has to be painful, but Ranboo doesn't dare touch him, not after what happened last time. *Habitual soft touch at his shoulder but he jerks like he's been shot throws himself away from you spends the entire night in smoldering silence don't touch me thrown at your feet the next morning*, that was over two weeks ago, and Ranboo hasn't tried touching him since.

Sometimes though, if it's a good day, Tubbo will reach for him, smooth a hand across his back or over his arms, but it's always his left hand, never uses his right ones anymore, keeps them held stiffly at his sides like they have the plague. It's not a hard thing to figure out why the sudden change, and edging closer so he doesn't have to yell, Ranboo tries, "Will you please just take a break for a few minutes?"

Tubbo doesn't act like he heard, head hanging low and exposing the back of his neck where dark red, angry blotches start, spread down the right side of his neck and shoulder, warp the skin on his right arms and side, curl around his front and lick up his chest, curve up over his jaw and cheek.

The medics said the scarring will lighten over time, managed to get to him quickly enough to reverse some nerve damage, but it's like Ranboo's hands, never going to be quite right again, will probably remain discolored for the rest of his life.

"Tub-" Ranboo clicks his mouth shut before he's even really started, cut off by the loud bang of palms slamming into a metal surface, Tubbo spitting furious without turning around, "I heard you the *first fucking time*. And. I'm. *Not. Hungry!*"

*Get out get oUT LEAVE ME ALONE glass dish slung at the wall when you won't listen voice cracking from how rough he screams shards everywhere blood running down his face bad day it was a bad day*, and apparently today is a bad day too, Ranboo exhaling sharp, drags palms across his face in exhaustion.

He knows healing isn't a linear path, *knows it intimately well*, but he also thinks he finally understands what Tubbo was talking about a month or so ago, about caring so much he gets upset, *angry* that there's nothing he can do and his loved one is actively trying to push him away. Ranboo isn't angry per say, he's more frustrated, knows it isn't logical to feel that way, but he can't *help it*.

There's been too little sleep and too much stress, his own bubbling fear and worry over his head injury, concerned it's never going to heal right, that his aim will never be what it was, and then just piled on top of that is all this mess with Tubbo. They process traumatic events differently, and where Ranboo gets all sullen and fatalistic, Tubbo winds himself up tighter and tighter, furious over the whole situation, driving himself to the edge of frothing madness.

It's been hard enough to get Tubbo to speak to him in general, *how's the Eshachi what are you working on what would you like for dinner will you sit with me have you showered drink some water please*, Ranboo hasn't even dared *broach* the subject of the crash. So he's not entirely sure what's eating at Tubbo, but given how well Ranboo knows him, understands the way he thinks, he can guess a few things off the top of his head.

He's mad he crashed, takes it as a knock to his skills as a pilot and is livid he was brought down by the *Sunfleet* of all things, the institution he'd wipe from the face of the universe if he could.

He's furious he damaged the Eshachi, and it's not *just* a ship, *it's never been just a ship*, she was his first partner and he cares for her as strongly as any of the people in his life, *and he failed her*.

But she's not the only one he failed in his mind, and he's beyond angry with himself that he hurt Ranboo in the process, won't *can't* look at him and see how he failed, the pale grey cast to his hands and the way they shake, *all because of him*.

*Want to protect you most important thing Boo don't want you to be hurt ever*, whispers in Ranboo's ears and he gets it *okay*, he'd be just as torn up about it if the situation was reversed, if *he* thought he was responsible for hurting Tubbo. Thing is though, Ranboo doesn't blame Tubbo at all, could honestly place as much blame on himself as Tubbo is doing, but...Ranboo actually doesn't even blame himself.

It was just a shit situation and neither of them are really at fault, and for the most part, Ranboo thinks he's doing pretty good all things considered. He gets up regularly and eats when he's supposed to, does his PT exercises and goes to work with Puffy, sees his friends, tries to stay busy, has been ignoring father and Reshaa when they do show up instead of engaging with them.

And it's probably a horribly morbid thought, but it's like the crash finally knocked loose all the festering crap in Ranboo's head, did kinda literally.

He was hallucinating *out the ass* for *days*, worse than he ever has before, but that last one... with mother, it's like someone respliced a damaged section of wiring, fit in something new so the connection can run safely, wrapped it up tight and secure.

It's not all bibbidi-bobbidi-*bonk* head injury fixed everything, more like the way he views existence has shifted, and it's not an easy thing to explain, but now Ranboo can look out at the great twinkling net of boundless starfields, then back down at his own speckled hands, and feel the same amount of reverence and awe.

Ranboo's been trying to show Tubbo that, how much better he's doing, *that he's okay*, but Tubbo's fallen so far down into this bottomless pit Ranboo hasn't been able to reach him, keeps getting cold shoulders and things flung at walls, so much seething, *ferocious* anger dripping out it's dizzying.

Everything about him right now is screaming for space, to be left alone, and Ranboo's been trying to honor that, not add on any pressure and let him heal at his own pace, talk when he's

ready, but it hasn't helped in the slightest. Tubbo just hides out down here and punishes himself, doesn't eat, doesn't sleep, won't do his PT, pushes his body to the brink of physical exhaustion, all in a twisted sense of justice to atone for what he *thinks* he's done.

They're different, *they're both so different*, in the way they handle things, in how they process and try to move forwards, but Tubbo isn't processing and Ranboo can't figure out *why*, doesn't know what to do, and it's a sobering, terrifying concept that what works for one isn't going to work for the other.

And it's only standing behind him now, burns a stark contrast on his tense body, angry, howling music deafening any other noise, that Ranboo realizes he's been going about this the wrong way, *his way*, has been a little too kind, a little too gentle.

Tubbo doesn't *need* gentle, he doesn't need subtlety and to dance around the subject, he needs to come screaming at this head on, he needs to have something to lock horns with, to have the sense knocked into him, *he needs someone to kick his ass into the training mats*.

And maybe Ranboo understands more than he thought he would.

Stepping up to the worktable, Ranboo sweeps through piles of crud until he unearths Tubbo's handheld, flicks it on before he can react and hits pause, launches them into a ringing silence that somehow feels louder than the music ever was.

"Hey what the fuck is your-?"

"You can have this back when you eat something." Ranboo says over his bitching, drops Tubbo's handheld into one of the inner pockets of his bomber and then zips it up for good measure, folds his arms and watches Tubbo sputter like a chemical reaction.

"I- you're *not my fucking mother!*" Tubbo snarls, left hand braced on the table as he cuts the right ones through the air, but Ranboo just cocks a brow, lazily drawling, "Oh yeah? And how would *you* know? You haven't talked to her once in the last two weeks."

Something cracks in his face for a second, furious snarl dropping away only to come right back, brows pinched together and low over his dark eyes, "That's none of your *fucking* business! How do you know anyway? Go through my messages or some sh-!"

"No. I talk to her pretty much every day...she always asks how you're doing." Ranboo says evenly, watching Tubbo very closely for his reaction, and it's not subtle, head snapping away as he works his jaw back and forth, voice dark when he mumbles, "What do you tell her."

*Glass shattering against walls blood on his face get out get out GET OUT bending wrenches backwards denting plastisteel hull LEAVE ME ALONE GET OUT screaming until he can't-*  
"The truth."

Tubbo exhales sharply, eyes slipping closed and his fingers tighten around the table's edge, holds a right hand out, demanding quietly, "Give me my handheld."

"Eat."

“Give me my *fucking* handheld, Ranboo.”

“*Eat.*” Ranboo insists in his hardest voice, the one he used to use with servants, *with anyone that tried arguing with him the one that sounds like his father*, and Tubbo’s started shaking, fingers around the table white knuckling, others clenching into fists, *chemical reaction bubbling up out of control about to come frothing out*, and good, *it needs to*, “I know you haven’t had anything since dinner last night besides coffee and energy drinks, so if you want your handheld back, you’re going to eat your lunch. *All of it.*”

It’s quiet for a breath, air stilled like the impending dread before a bomb goes off, and as soon as he thinks it, Tubbo’s lurching into movement with a feral shriek, snatches the container of soup and launches it at the opposite wall, plastic lid exploding off and flinging liquid everywhere.

“What the FUCK IS YOUR *PROBLEM!* *Who the FUCK do you think you are?* My FUCKING DRILL SERGEANT!” Tubbo roars, wings flaring open behind him, edges of the left ones crinkled up like melted plastic, “Fuck you! F-FUCK YOU! Y-You and your- *stupid entitled ASS! Give me back my handheld!*”

Breathe in, breathe out, *you can handle the heat plant your feet meet him head on*, and with all the stability and impassivity of a brick wall, Ranboo says, “No.”

Tubbo screams, hands spasming angrily, *looking for something to tear into to rip apart*, spins and sweeps everything off the table and onto the floor, metal pinging and clanging loudly as it rattles across slick concrete, fists his upper hands in his hair and shrieks, “*I HATE YOU! I- I FUCKING HATE YOU!*”

It hurts, there’s no way it’s not going to hurt, but Ranboo probably hurt Dream flying at him like a deranged animal, never pulled his punches, and Dream still never flinched, caught him under the arms and flipped him mercilessly. “Okay.” Ranboo says with an easy shrug, takes all the pain he’s feeling and sets it aside for now, knows he can get rid of it tomorrow, let it free while he’s soldering wires back together, “That’s fine, you’re allowed to hate me, it’s not going to stop me loving you though.”

“It *fucking should.*” Tubbo seethes, hunching over to prop his elbows on the worktable, fingers still snarled up in his hair, lower right arm wrapped crushingly around his middle, looks like he’s got a hand white knuckling over his cast, “There’s *nothing* about me worth loving.”

“That’s the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. There’s so much about you to love.” Ranboo insists even though he knows Tubbo’s not going to believe him, but he’s sure as hell not *going to agree with him*, and as expected, Tubbo scoffs meanly, “You’re so full of shit.”

Ranboo cocks a hip against the table, leaning a little closer, wary of sudden fists swinging that could accidentally clip him, “You’re full of shit too. *‘Nothing about me worth loving’* yeah fucking right, you’re one of the easiest people to love...your mother *adores* you, Tommy looks up to you, and there’s *no one* I’ve ever cared for more than you-”



“Oh *good for you all then!* But big whoop-de-fucking-do, who gives a shit!” Tubbo snarls, sinking down onto his elbows further, forehead almost touching the cool metal of the worktable, breath fogging up the surface as he spits, “Who- *fucking CARES* that you *love me?* I almost got you fucking killed! I-I *knew* I couldn’t win that fight, I should’ve surrendered, turned myself in, *but all I think about is my fucking SELF!*”

He lurches up after slamming his palms into the tabletop, pushes back roughly and stalks across the repair bay, kicking at stray parts so they zip and ping across the floor, screaming the whole time, “I’m selfish! I AM SO *FUCKING SELFISH!* I didn’t think a-about you at *all!* I was just mad a-and angry and-!”

The noise he makes sounds like it tears his throat open, raw and primal, like nothing Ranboo has ever heard, visceral fury that has shivers breaking out across his skin, hair standing up on end as Tubbo roars, “I-I got us into that fight! *I GOT US INTO THAT FIGHT!* A-And I *couldn’t even get us out!* C-Crashed our *fucking* ship, n-nearly k-killed you *should’ve gotten myself killed-!*”

Tubbo laughs and it’s *horrible*, empty and hollow and manic, sounds like desperation, *like madness*, and he spins unsteady on his heel, hands flying out while he cackles, “But HEY! What a *FUCKING surprise!* I CAN’T DO ANYTHING RIGHT- c-can’t even die when I’m meant to! All I do is cause fucking problems and hurt people and you *should’ve left me in there to die!*”

It hits like a knife through the chest, aches in his bones and crushes them inwards, feels like he’s caving in on himself, and Ranboo’s stumbling forwards, trying to get to him, when Tubbo screeches like a madman, “A-And *WHAT a FITTING end!* BURNED ALIVE. W-WHAT A-! W-What- w-w-what a fit- f-fitting-”

His knees are buckling almost immediately, like all the fight has gone out of him, doesn’t have the energy to stay up anymore, but he never hits the ground, Ranboo teleporting those last few feet and catching him before he falls. Memories strike him *hard*, *legs shaky trying to hold you up hold him up has never felt so small so fragile fire everywhere you can’t see he’s hurt he’s hurt have to get him OUT*, and Ranboo staggers back, spine ramming into the side of the Eshachi as he slides to the floor.

Tubbo is sobbing, clutches hands in the front of Ranboo’s bomber and bawls his eyes out, unclear if any of the incoherent noises tumbling from his mouth are meant to be words or not. Shifting them into a more comfortable position, Ranboo bundles him closer, tucks Tubbo’s head under his chin and rocks them back and forth while he howls in unbearable grief.

“You’re okay, you’re okay.” Ranboo presses into the top of his head over and over again, hands rubbing across his back, in between his wings, and hearing the way Tubbo wails in response, Ranboo snuffles hard, “I-I’m here, you’re okay, I got you I’m here. L-Let it out, you’re okay, love, love you s-so much, you’re *okay.*”

“M’sorry! M’s-sorry! *I-I’m so s-sorry! M’sorr m’sorry m’sorry s-sorry- f-fuck s-so sor-ry!*” Tubbo hiccups desperately, voice catching rough and painful in his throat, breaks off into mournful keening that tears Ranboo’s heart into shreds. His tail snaps up and coils around one of Tubbo’s legs, arms shifting so he can free a hand to cradle the back of his head,

whispers jumping and frantic, “I-I know, *I-I know*, b-but i-it’s okay, *I’m okay, I’m okay Bo*, a-and I *love* you, I-I’m *never* going to stop loving you.”

Ranboo bows his head, rubs his cheek over Tubbo’s dusty hair, wishes he had horns Ranboo could knock together, has to settle for murmuring shakily, “There’s nothing that c-could make me *stop* loving you. I-I’m here, by your side, for h-however long you w-want *me*...there isn’t *anything* in existence that could make me leave you.”

It doesn’t matter if Tubbo recognizes his own words or not, but the effect is instant, has him huddling into Ranboo’s shoulder and crying like a lost child, scared and terribly alone. His left hand comes up to clasp Ranboo in the juncture where his neck meets his shoulder, palm clammy and shaking, hauls their heads together and just- *lets go* of everything that’s been festering away, eating him from the inside out.

And Ranboo keeps him close throughout the whole breakdown, voice a low steady thrum of endless affection and devotion, promises to always care for him, to never leave him, to love him unconditionally, *to care for him like only the way a cariad can like the universe does starlight in mortal form love you beating under your palm*, and Tubbo wails he doesn’t deserve it.

“Yes you do.” Ranboo murmurs into his hair, claws carding through messy, unwashed curls, and finds the loose, barely there shape of his braid, “You deserve to be loved so wholly and completely...*adored*. You deserve to be adored entirely for who you are, Tubbo Underscore.”

Tubbo’s breath hitches sharply, something like breathless confusion and incredulity in his tone when he wheezes, “*Q-Queens past*, t-the shit you *s-say*...”

Humming lightly, Ranboo rocks his head and drags his chin across the top of Tubbo’s head, and in the back of his mind, he hears a sunlit voice laugh *housecat*, purrs for the hell of it and smiles at the way Tubbo relaxes into him, “Sorry, m’kinda a gross mush ball.”

“I...I-I like that you’re a gross m-mush ball.” Tubbo says around hitching inhales, but they’re slowing down, back jumping less frantically under Ranboo’s arm, and finally, he heaves out a deep, wet exhale, “I-I’m so sorry, Boo, *s-so sorry...f-for e-everything*.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Ranboo says low and fierce, but Tubbo thuds him lightly with his head, sniffing hard, “C-Can you not r-right now? I...I just *can’t Boo, I-*”

His voice gets too choked up for him to say more, and Ranboo runs a careful hand over his left wing, helps Tubbo untense again and hushes soft, “Okay, okay Bo, you’re okay. Whatever you need, okay darling? Anything at all.”

“I-” Tubbo clicks his jaw shut harsh, Ranboo can feel the clatter through his collarbones, but he rubs his fingers purposefully along the thick vein at the top of Tubbo’s wing and it comes tumbling out, “C-Can you tell me you l-love me?”

“Always.” Ranboo breathes, lovingly runs the pads of his fingers over gossamer chitin, finds and traces thinner veins that meet to form geometric cells, says as sure and confidently like it’s the only constant in the universe, “I *love* you, with *all my heart*. To the moon and back,

amor...around the stars past the galaxy, to the edge of reality and beyond. There's no one in existence like you Tubbo Underscore, no one more deserving of happiness."

"*Reginae praeterita-*" Tubbo gasps, hands twisting up sharply in the front of Ranboo's bomber as he shudders, "M-My *Queens* I- y-you- I *l-love you so f-fucking much. I-I- s-shit* m'not good with words, b-but I love you, an' m'so s-sorry, I-I-I didn't w-want you to g-get h-hurt I-"

"I'm *okay, m'right here.*" Ranboo soothes, shifts Tubbo so his head is resting where he can hear Ranboo's heart beating, *love you love you love you*, worms a free hand in between them and very gently spreads it out across Tubbo's chest, right over where his own pulse thunders, "And so are you."

They sit like that for a good long while, Tubbo's heart slowing down and lulling to match Ranboo's, and he hums his contentment at being so close after being apart for so long, warmth going to his head and making his brain a little fuzzy. If it were up to Ranboo, they'd never move, but Tubbo starts to shift minutely, feels like he's trying to get the pressure off something and is failing, and Ranboo wonders what that's about when conscious thought breaks through the haze in his head.

*What's he- right side why's...RIGHT SIDE oh shit-*

Ranboo quickly shuffles them both so Tubbo's not being crushed into his chest anymore, can finally get the tension off the tender skin along his arms and side, and a quick glance down has Ranboo's ears falling seeing how red and aggravated the burns are.

"*Ancients-* s-sorry, *shit*, I- i-is there anything I can- um...d-do they hurt?" Ranboo asks worriedly, looks back up and stalls at the nasty glower on Tubbo's face, not necessarily one of pain, something closer to disgust, and Ranboo's hand drops to rest along his side, "Are you alright?"

Flicking dark eyes up to his, there's an unusual amount of vulnerability and uncertainty in Tubbo's expression, and he's quick to turn his head away, huffing, "Y-Yeah, m'alright. They-i-it doesn't...it's n-not *as* bad, just like- tender I guess, s-sorry know it's gross I-I can-"

"It's not gross." Ranboo assures, *means it would always mean it you hate the spiderwebs on your skin but could never hate the red stains across his*, but Tubbo doesn't really look like he believes him, has got that stubborn set to his face Ranboo finds hopelessly endearing, "If they're not bothering you, what's wrong?"

Tubbo opens and then closes his mouth, shakes the hair out of his eyes but still won't turn to look at Ranboo, and that's when he notices how weird Tubbo's sitting, head twisted at an awkward angle, all so his right side is as hidden as possible, and Ranboo feels like he's starting to understand.

"I just-" Tubbo cuts himself off with a big gust of air, *avoid mirrors reflective surfaces hate the way it feels hate the way it looks going to be there forever mark you carry until the day you die*, flicks his eyes to the side like he's looking for something, "I...it's kinda stupid."

Reaching out very slowly, so Tubbo can see what he's intending and pull away if he wants, Ranboo touches careful fingertips to one of Tubbo's right hands, smooths them up over his knuckles and rests them lightly on a patch of red, angry skin. "It's not stupid." Ranboo murmurs, dares to edge a little higher, until his palm is covering the burn, can feel the slight heat it radiates still, "I'm self-conscious about my scars and they're tiny com- c-compared to this."

"It's *not* a competition, I-I'm not trying to m-make this a *competition*." Tubbo snaps defensive, and gingerly sliding his hand higher, Ranboo wraps his fingers around Tubbo's wrist and gives it a gentle squeeze, "I know, I'm just telling you I *understand*."

Slowly, haltingly, Tubbo tips his head up, pauses when their eyes are more or less level and doesn't say anything, like he's waiting for Ranboo to get a good look and decide he's changed his mind, like he'll rear back to sneer that the burns *are* gross. The skin across Tubbo's right cheek is shiny pink at the edges that deepens into an angry red as it dips under his jaw, and it makes Ranboo's heart constrict painfully because that's his husband, *that's his person and he hurts*, but it's still *Tubbo*, and Ranboo smiles at him brilliantly, "Hey handsome."

Tubbo's eyebrows fly up in surprise, eyes scrunching closed in a violent bout of laughter, grin so wide it brings dimples into existence, and it's never been more gratifying to be right, Ranboo thinks, falling a little more in love with the beautiful smile Tubbo gives him. Snaking his hand out from under Tubbo's wings, Ranboo lightly cups his right cheek, elated giggles cutting off abruptly as a thumb sweeps tenderly over the discolored skin.

"You look just as handsome as the first time I saw you." Ranboo murmurs sweet, eyes crinkling as he gazes at Tubbo fondly, *ears that stick out a little bit freckles across his shoulders warm chestnut hair he's growing out eyes like the velvet of the night your cariad your husband your person*, rumbles deep and affectionate in his chest, "My dashing rogue, my lovely knight, you'll always be beautiful no matter what."

Tears collide stinging and overly warm against his hand, but Ranboo brushes through them, lets Tubbo twist his face into his palm, shaking with silent sobs, runs his other hand through messy hair and picks at his sloppy braid, "C'mere, melli, *c'mere*, let me fix this for you."

Ranboo doesn't have a comb or anything, so he detangles Tubbo's hair with his claws, and they sit back to front while he rebraids that section. When he's done, has tied off the little braid and slipped his bead over the end, hands find his, and they settle side by side against the hull of the Eshachi, scarred fingers interwoven and rubbing gently at one another.

"M'ey...think...m'like you." Tubbo mumbles barely coherent, sounds like he's on the edge of sleep and Ranboo's close to meeting him there, abdomen jumping in the barest laugh as he rocks their heads together, teasing sleepily, "Didn't already?"

But Tubbo doesn't answer, from the sound of it, asleep already, and pulling him closer, Ranboo lets his eyes shut as well, wiggles a hand up to rest lightly over where Tubbo's heart beats, drifts off feeling, *love you love you love you*, thud under his fingertips.

**Lesson Four: Admitting to mistakes is admitting weakness it's not weak nothing weak about this**

His hands shake trying to smooth down rumpled pages, everything's shaking about him actually, legs trembling like they're about to give out, breath catching and tripping in his lungs, can't stop seeing-

*-fists swinging at you going to hit you again sharp crack to your jaw crowding you back mirror shards under your palm enslaved my people you fucking killed her she screams color high on his face eyes livid you think you love him he hates you he hates you he hates you he HATES YOU-*

*-you still have that blaster he gave you just go back and get it, Reshaa sighs from behind him, claws trailing across his shoulders and Ranboo shudders, looks behind him and sees nothing but an empty mossy clearing, jumps hearing her voice right at his other ear, bet that barrel would fit real well under your jaw all it takes is one finger just like one more step something easy you can do it-*

*I have to return the book first, Ranboo stresses, doesn't miss that he said first, and neither does Reshaa, purring lowly as she ghosts past, hmmm good boy know your worth know your place trash not worth anything we never wanted you no one ever has even your cariad doesn't want you supposed to be the only one for you but he hates you-*

The thought sends him to his knees, codex falling out of limp hands as Ranboo buries frantic claws in squishy moss, flinching when he hears off to his left, *pathetic always told you you were unwanted and now even the person that's supposed to love you unconditionally can't stand you what a waste of space of breath of life you don't deserve to exist.*

*"S-Shut up-" Ranboo begs, body heaving like he's going to throw up, but there's nothing in his system, there's nothing in him empty thing little shadow on the wall nothings ever been there and nothing ever will what's the point of hanging on just let go just jump, and he clutches a hand to his head howling, "Shut up! Leave me A-ALONE!"*

*Weak, Meleeri barks and Ranboo sinks lower, burning forehead meeting the cool dewy ground, you've always been weak buckle at the slightest pressures there was never any hope for you you always would've been a failure, wishes he could keep going, slip headfirst into the midnight sand seas and never come back out, go ahead kill yourself do you know how they'll remember you? As the biggest disappointment, the greatest failure, that is...if they even bother to remember you at all.*

*"Stop it-!" Ranboo pleads with tears warping his voice, but they don't care, crowd closer and press their freezing hands into his back, forcing him lower, forcing him to submit-*

*Give in what's the point go grab that blaster fit it under your chin depress that trigger depress that syringe it'll take you to the floor permanently this time give IN melt away into the shadows down here melt away into nothing never mattered never will GIVE IN he hates you your cariad and he hates you why were you ever surprised why did you ever think he'd love you GIVE-*

Turbines whirl loudly above him, and Ranboo whips his head up, heart beating high in his throat as he scrambles to his feet, fumbling the codex from the ground as the Irilian ship lands in a gust of wind. Through the fizzing sandy static that clouds his mind, he has the half coherent thought that this ship is ugly as sin, all shoddily patched together, silhouette hulking and clunky, nothing like-

*-graceful sweep of wings and fiery red lines swooping around turbines match the stripes on his jacket elegant curve of his own wings reflection of him fast dangerous beautiful you think you love him-*

“Well! Isn't *this* a surprise.” A jovial voice shouts and blinking back to reality, Ranboo straightens up seeing the person striding down the ship's cargo ramp, yellow eyes a little too smug in a scarred face, purple hair like a mane flowing down past their shoulders, *Irilian insurrectionist scum lower lifeform uncivilized shut UP-*

“Didn't think ol'bumble brain would let *you* get out of his sights.” The Irilian says, grins and flashes a ferocious set of canines that makes Ranboo a little self-conscious over his own, but that concern is soon out of his head when the other drawls, “So...whatchu doing out here on your own fancy boy? Where's worker bee?”

*Don't call him that don't call him that he's smarter better more capable than you'll ever be claws flexing into the book cover around the trigger of a blaster don't CALL HIM THAT-* but through the seething haze, the rest of what they said trickles through. There's something to their tone, makes all his hackles rise, and Ranboo knows a threat when he hears one, hopes he does an adequate job smothering his nerves as he holds the codex out, happy at least his arm doesn't shake.

“H-He's...he's busy...and I-I told you, I wanted to return this.” And Ranboo's still not sure how to apologize really, is finding it hard to stomach saying anything of the sort to this... *cretin*, but then he's thinking about angry disappointed eyes, *spoiled brat can't have everything you want*, manages to get out, “I...should not have taken it.”

In his head, it goes something like this, the Irilian takes the codex and accepts Ranboo's apology, leave him to his business and then when Tubbo comes back later, sees Ranboo fixed it, *he can behave he knows how to behave he can be good please just look at me please Ancients please know how to behave*, he'll forgive him, and will maybe possibly let Ranboo dance with him again, but this time, *Ranboo's going to tell him only one for me love you could you love me too-*

But in reality, it goes something a little more like this.

The Irilian laughs.

Straight up tips their head back and *laughs*, Ranboo so caught off guard, he doesn't notice the others strolling out of the ship at first, blasters drawn as they flank their comrade, barrels coming up to point at his chest when he reflexively steps back, sharp grins all saying the same thing, *nuh uh not so fast*.

“Ahh man, that’s cute, you’re cute, chikoni.” Yellow Eyes laughs again, acts like they’re wiping something from under their eyes but then the smile is gone, face deadly with dark, seething anger as they level their blaster right at Ranboo’s head, “Hands up. And if you even *think* about teleporting I’ll blow a hole in that stupid long face of yours.”

Ranboo *does* think about teleporting, but doesn’t, and it’s more shock than anything that has him raising his hands shyly, moronic, naïve thought that if he complies, he’ll be okay. Yellow Eyes jerks their head and one of the others comes forward, blaster slipping back into their holster, and Ranboo eyes him warily as he circles past, red eyes narrowing in something like viscous glee.

There’s an unexpected driving pain in the backs of his knees then, sends him stumbling, but Ranboo manages to keep his footing. It’s only for a second though, and he cries out as a sharp force slams into his lower back, knocks him to his knees, instinctually twists to look behind him but fingers fist hard in his hair, force his head back around.

“Hey, eyes forwards chikoni.” Yellow Eyes says, snapping their fingers right in his face while they hand over a bundle of thin, dark objects to the Irilian behind Ranboo, and the reality of the situation really only sinks in when his arms are yanked back, wrists bound tightly with the plastic ties.

*Always warned you this could happen you stupid boy but you never listen and now look you’ve walked right into it,* Meleeri sneers, edges of her dress barely visible around Yellow Eyes, and Ranboo’s too terrified to argue with her, pulse thundering loud in his ears, drowning out all the ambient noise around him.

They’re saying something to him but he can’t parse it, stares up at Yellow Eyes stupidly, frozen in place, *frozen in fear know what happens dark dingy rooms bodies never found if the money never shows teleport teleport now can’t can’t think can’t find coordinates can’t focus can’t make the pearl freeze can’t h-help help HELP HELP HELP HELPHELPHELPHE-*

Ranboo’s head snaps to the side harshly, fiery pain blooming across his cheek as he rolls his head back up, feels like he swallows his tongue coming face to face with the dark, bottomless barrel of a blaster, can’t look away from it as an irritated voice huffs, “*I said. Get. Up.*”

It’s pathetic how quickly he staggers to his feet, can’t find his balance at first and tips to the side, face flushing in shame as the Irilians all just laugh at him, talk amongst themselves in the sharp, fast speech of their planet, turn to leer at Ranboo and his ears flick back uncomfortably. A blaster rams into his back once he’s on his feet, *move*, and Ranboo squares his shaking shoulders and tips his chin up, strides forwards with more confidence than he feels, but his footsteps clanging up the ship’s ramp sound like bell towers ringing in mourning.

“Do you require the comm line number for Voidfall?” Ranboo asks in his most detached voice, claws twisting to pick at the tender skin over his wrists, nervously scratching until it hurts, “I have my father’s personal line as well as the head of security. Is there one you’d prefer? Or both perha-?”

Their laughter echoes loud and *ugly* in the empty cargo bay, sounds like the wailing of wind up on the parapets, and shivers breakout across his body, tongue dead and useless in his mouth as Yellow Eyes comes forwards, nothing Ranboo can do to stop them from grabbing his chin, hauling him down so they're at eye level.

"What's the rush, chikoni?" Yellow purrs, livid furious *seething anger* in their eyes, *empire almost wiped them out imperial dog your horrible planet terrible people*, absolute terror igniting in Ranboo's veins like the rumble of engines kicking on seeing that look, *the promises of violent retribution*, "I think we're gonna have some fun first."

~~**You try to be strong you don't think you manage**~~

--

**Tommy Innit**

19:54

>> holy shit did you get him to fucking shower

>> how

>> literally how

20:02

<< Mm hm

<< The secret is refusing to cuddle with him on the grounds he smells like week old grubby mechanic.

<< He was out of our room before I'd finished talking.

20:13

>> AHHHEALALMOO WHAT THE FUCK

>> r u being series or nah rn

>> please ranboob I have to kno

>> this is such good blackmail material creators

<< Yes?



<< We're both pretty physically affectionate so withholding that was a good motivator.

>> no shit

<< is that a problem?

>> no no!

>> not at all

>> just strange tubs never been like that with me or like

>> anyone

>> jus strange is all bossman

<< Well yeah he wouldn't be like that with you.

<< No offense! I mean, it makes sense considering.

>> considering what?

"You've got quite the aim, kid."

Ranboo jumps where he is in line, handheld flipping around between his hands before he manages to catch it for good, turns sheepish eyes to the figure standing next to him and eeks out, "Uuuh- t-thanks?"

One of Techno's brows is cocked in amusement, arms loosely folded across his chest as he shrugs, hair in a long plait down his back, "No need to thank me, s'just the facts. Phil's been buggin' me 'bout it for *weeks*, thought I'd finally go and try my hand, but *Ancestors*, you don't mess around, huh?"

"O-Oh! I um, I- just, I-I'm good a-at running the calculations? Like. I-It's simple math honestly." Ranboo explains quickly, a little caught off guard talking to *The Technoblade*, Blood God, Scourge of Seventeen Systems, in the middle of the cafeteria like this is a thing he does every day.

“You...do *math- in your head...* while you’re in the middle of shooting?” Techno questions, eyebrows arching high on his forehead, and it’s so hard reading him, Ranboo can never tell if the crime lord is upset or dissatisfied, fumbles his handheld again and tucks it away before he can drop the stupid thing, “I- *um*, y-yes? Is t-that- I mean- i-if that’s *uh*, n-not okay then-”

“Kid. That’s honestly amazing, and frankly, a little alarmin’. You’ve got to be one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, no lie.” Techno says still in the deadpan that unfairly reminds Ranboo of- *strong set to his shoulders won’t look at you never looks at you-* but unlike *him*, Techno’s eyes are red and warm and fixate on him with something like *pride*, “You’re real impressive, Ranboo.”

Ranboo’s glad he put his handheld up because with the way his body goes slack, he would’ve dropped it on the floor no hesitation, probably would’ve cracked the screen or something with his luck. *Quite the aim honestly amazing smartest person he’s ever met real impressive looks at you like you’re worth something*, slants down through his mind like sun rays and warms Ranboo up from the inside out.

He hasn’t spoken to Techno much, *why would he he’s nobody here that’s a good thing tired of being somebody*, and it honestly makes him really nervous, feels like he’s standing before the entire court again, one wrong move away from utter annihilation. It’s not a rational fear, Techno has never done or said anything to warrant this reaction, actually gives Ranboo a lot of space, but it’s an ingrained thing, hammered into him from the time he could walk.

*Know your place in line only speak when spoken to hands behind your back heels clicked together chin up mouth shut behave you know how to behave*, sharp crack of a riding crop if he ever slipped up, if he relaxed his shoulders or grinned with his fangs bared, bred apprehension and paranoia around anyone that carried the mantle of *authority*.

So it’s extra gratifying, *extra exhilarating everything he’s ever wanted to hear you did good you did great exceeded expectations proud of you worth something*, to hear Techno offer such simple praises in his even monotone, eyes crinkling at the corners while he grins a crooked half smile.

And it’s not the same, *it’s not exactly right wrong setting wrong face wrong voice does it matter does it matter though*, but it kinda feels like Ranboo’s been waiting his whole life to hear those words.

“I...t-thank you, sir.” Ranboo hushes, feet twisting together bashfully, has to fight the urge to bow to Techno like he was taught, but he owes so much to this man, *took you in no questions has sheltered you since spent days looking for you brought you both home large palm on your shaking shoulder you’re okay kid*, does at least cut an informal bow, “I-I’m not sure I ever thanked you properly for rescuing us. Please know you have the deepest gratitude from the very depths of my heart, and if there’s anything I can do to repay that, please don’t hesitate.”

There’s the soft scuff of boots, wave of something warm and slightly spicy, like cinnabar, gunpowder and swirling embers, and a hand claps him lightly on the arm, settling into something more sure when Ranboo leans into the contact, “Hey, it’s not like that here, you don’t owe me anythin’. I helped ‘cause I wanted to, ‘cause *I’m supposed to*, I said I got your back and I *mean it*.”

Peeking up through his bangs, Ranboo sees Techno smiling at him, somehow, one of the gentlest things despite the tusks and scars, “Look, you guys, the Syndicate- *everyone* here? You’re all like my family, I’d do anything’ for ya. So. If there’s anythin’ *you need*, don’t hesitate, m’kay?”

“O-Okay.” Ranboo agrees shakily, still a little lost with the grounding palm on his shoulder, caring red eyes that stay fixed on his face, that *see him, proud of you he’s proud of you has your back watches your six protects you*, and with a hearty pat, Techno pulls away, “I gotta run, kid, sorry. Phil wanted me to grab dinner on my way back, but hit me up next time you’re goin’ to the range.”

“I- y-yeah, sure, o-okay...” Ranboo mumbles dazed, somehow manages to scrape together enough sense to wave goodbye to *The Technoblade* on his way out, shuffles back into line for the replicator and wonders when his life got so strange.

If you’d told him a year ago he’d be casually having a conversation about *his shooting skills* with one of the most *wanted criminals* in the *entire empire*, Ranboo would’ve laughed until he passed out, and then if you’d told him a few months ago that *Technoblade*, one of the best shots in the galaxy, *wanted* to go shooting with *him*, Ranboo Underscore, he would’ve thought you were crazier than he is.

*Not crazy*, part of his mind snaps and Ranboo rolls his eyes affectionately, imagines booping the glowering memory of Tubbo on the nose, *maybe a little but that’s okay I’m okay with that*, and he means it, likes to think he’s been gentler with himself recently.

Ranboo pays out small compliments when he does something he’s proud of, *lets himself feel pride in the first place*, like the excited shivers that run up his spine when he fixes something and it *works*, or being on his own somewhere in the base and not flinching when someone strikes up a conversation, or when he’s able to coax Tubbo back into the semblance of living a normal life.

That last one has been the thing he’s been most proud of recently, can’t stop the way he bounces down the halls with Tubbo shuffling his feet at his side, right arms shyly curled around Ranboo’s left, and it’s a slow process, but more nights than not, Tubbo will let Ranboo lead him out of the repair bay hand in hand.

Today’s been an especially good day, Tubbo suggested they do something of his own accord, hesitantly asking if Ranboo wanted to watch a movie with him, and Ranboo’s tail poofed at the thought, knew that meant the dim soothing quiet of their room and warm hands threaded through his, agreed so fast and so jumbled it made Tubbo giggle uncontrollably.

And since it was a good day, *scarred hand in yours fingers laced together doesn’t flinch when you touch his shoulders*, Ranboo decided to push his luck, jokingly complained and whined about unwashed engine oil smell until Tubbo caved, left their room with his shower stuff and fingers plugging his ears, making nonsense noises to drown Ranboo out.

It almost felt like the first time when Tubbo climbed into bed later, settled searing hot but so achingly familiar in Ranboo’s arms, like he’d always belonged there. He put on something silly and easy that neither one of them really paid attention to, Ranboo too lost in braiding

Tubbo's hair, claws raking along his scalp until he buzzed contentedly, and Tubbo too enamored tracing the discolored patches on Ranboo's hands when he was done.

In between one hijinks filled scene and another, Ranboo must've drifted off, lost somewhere in that hazy half awake, *desperately trying to keep your head up*, kinda sleep that leaves him super groggy and confused when the credits start rolling. It's only then that Ranboo realized they'd dozed through *another* movie, tried propping himself up, but he had an entire dead weight of sleepy, angry bee plastered into his front that did *not* want to move.

"Bo, we need dinner, s'late." Ranboo tried reasoning, he shouldn't have tried reasoning, carded through soft clean curls and grinned at the whiny noises Tubbo made, "Come on, up, *up*. We need to eat. Look, I'll go get the food, and it'll give you a chance to call Tommy. I know you've been meaning to."

"M'noooo." Tubbo groaned, twisting his face further into Ranboo's chest, antennae flipped up and tickling the underside of his chin, "M'tired, an' he's *looouuuud*."

"He sure is, but no excuses. You care for him and he cares for you, so stop avoiding him. Plus, it'll wake you up." Ranboo said chipperly, finally wiggled free and laughed when Tubbo limply face planted into the mattress, whining high pitched and annoying the entire time Ranboo got ready to leave.

And that's how Ranboo left him, door swishing shut on the wheezing noises that were going a little out of breath, but he assumes Tubbo did end up calling Tommy, if the amazed texts he got about a presentable looking Tubbo are anything to go by.

*Good job you did that you helped you're a good friend a good partner a good husband*, he thinks with a proud sweep of his tail, steps up to the replicator when it's his turn and punches in both their usual dinner orders, clicks the lids over the reusable containers and tucks them away in his bag once it's done. Ranboo fills up their water bottles as well, yellow one for him, flat metallic grey plastered in stickers for Tubbo, snags a canned fruit drink Tubbo likes and is on his way back as quickly as he can, doesn't want their food to get cold.

It's kinda a weird turn their lives have gone, time really slowing down while they've been on medical leave, not much to do besides putter around HQ and help out where they can. Things have been quiet lately, which isn't a bad thing, they both needed a break from the high speed adrenaline of their jobs, but Tubbo's arm is almost ready to be out of his cast and Ranboo knows he's got a little bit of cabin fever. *Have to remind him to take it slow ease back into things*, but with a fond snort, Ranboo rolls his eyes because *Tubbo* and *take it slow*, are not really synonymous.

Ranboo's in the middle of thinking up good arguments to use against him, and gentle threats when that inevitably fails, *no cuddles no hand holding won't trace over your wings*, when he baps his ID at their door to open it, catches the unmistakable, *and loud*, voice of Tommy calling tinny out of speakers, "-do something, can't just keep letting the poor fucker think you're-"

"*Shit*- I-I gotta go." Tubbo spits too fast, fumbles sloppily trying to hang up as Ranboo steps in, and his tail curls behind his legs, can tell he's walked in on something he probably

shouldn't have, sets the bag down in a now ringing silence.

"Um, h-hey. Do uh, d-do you need me to come back later or...?" Ranboo hedges, more than willing to provide Tubbo with all the privacy he needs, and he might need to, given the way Tubbo immediately starts rambling, "Huh? W-Wha- n-no! Nope! Nope nope nope! Everything is *uh*, j-just great ste- b-bossman, mm hm! Yup! *Y-Yep yep yep!*"

"Okaaay?" Ranboo squints at him confused and there's something not quite right about him, but Ranboo's having a hard time putting a finger on it. *Is it the jittery way he's waving his hands around wings flickering in agitation nervous scared something with Tommy then maybe his warrants no safe here...why...isn't he looking at you why won't he look at you why is-* and his train of thought comes screeching to a halt, registering what looks off about Tubbo and the entire, unbound floof of his hair.

His braid is gone.

And that's, *hm*, it's- i-it's fine, it was probably pulling at his hair weird, sloppily done, *laying half on each other in bed it's fine it's okay overreacting just calm down think rationally don't spiral-*

Ranboo takes a calming breath and clicks his tongue, knew he should've grabbed the comb and not just done it with his claws, starts pulling his boots off as he says, "Hey, if your braid was bothering you, you should've said something. I would've redone it better before I left."

The laugh that wheezes out has Ranboo snapping his head up, one shoe on the other off, stares at Tubbo in concern, and he's hunched over, staring at his hands, antennae tense and shoulders up around his ears. *That's...not good what's wrong is he okay thought it was a good day maybe not it's okay things change but it's okay you're both okay support him love him,* and lowering his foot to the floor, Ranboo calls softly, "Hey, everything okay, heul-?"

"T-The b-braid, what um, w-what does it m-mean." Tubbo stammers, fingers so snarled up together they're bleeding white at the tips, and something's wrong, Ranboo can feel it simmering in the air, drags against his nerves like granules of freezing sand, and very slowly, he straightens up, "I um- it's a symbol of my commitment to you, to show we're partners, hus-"

*Split second reaction* but Tubbo relaxes hands slackening and in his palm, glittering in the light is *his bead*, but then the rest of the words tumble out and Tubbo flinches so *hard* that Ranboo stumbles over himself, "-h-husbands I- I-I mean, o-or *spouses* if you prefer I um- I guess I n-never asked what you preferred, s-sorry, just thought that since you used masculine pro-"

"*H-Husbands?*" Tubbo wheezes like someone's slugged him in the gut, *like he's in pain reeling lost and alone and sacred through the void*, fingers wrapping tight over his bead almost as if he wants to crush it out of existence, and Ranboo doesn't *understand he doesn't know what's happening why is he acting like this like he doesn't know they're mar-*

No, no no no no *that's not possible you're being insane you are insane he knows he has to know he h-he can't not but you can't breathe why can't you breathe calm down can't stop*

*spiraling hands around your throat husbands like he doesn't know the definition of the word, sounds like something uses his voice to say from a million miles away, "I- y-yeah. Husbands. L-Like I said, u-unless you wanna be called something else but-"*

*"We're married?" And Tubbo finally looks up, and Ranboo wishes he hadn't, never wanted to see shock and terror and panic like that ever again, alarms wailing Eshachi rattling hard ground rushing up towards you think you smell smoke he screams your name last thing you see this exact face staring back at you right now husbands he asks like he doesn't know what it means like he doesn't know that-*

*"Y-Yes, b-but you know that...y-you know that r-right?" Ranboo stammers, heart doing double time in his chest, he feels sick he's going to throw up this is a nightmare right this isn't real RIGHT, but Tubbo just stares at him horrified like he didn't know but how could he not how could HE NOT, and in the background, a thousand tiny details steamroll past and Ranboo feels like he's drowning-*

*Doesn't know what a cariad bead is for don't have one for you you're about to cry he isn't carefree attitude the whole time because he DOESN'T KNOW- staggering backwards legs weak can't bear his weight aren't send him collapsing to the floor -have to keep reminding him to braid his hair to braid yours lets you do it he LETS YOU DO IT HE DOESN'T KNOW- harsh crack of his knees into unrelenting plastisteel it doesn't register only dark eyes do and it's -don't know much about Ender culture jokes about wooing you because he DOESN'T KNOW never asked if you wanted earnings because to him you're not HIS HUSBAND-*

*"Aynaftaid na, n-na na na NA- hwn n-nid yw go i-iawn, hwn n-nid yw r-real, A-Ancients I- t-this nid yw real T-THIS I-ISN'T REAL-" Ranboo pleads, hands snarling in his hair desperately, eyes unfocused and dizzy, Ancients he's so dizzy world falling out from under him isn't real bad dream nightmare not real not CAN'T BE REAL TELLS YOU HE- H-HE- "No! N-NO! Y-You- you t-told m-me you l-loved me! Y-You- y-y-you keep t-telling m-me you l-love-"*

*"Not like a h-husband!" Tubbo yelps, weird looks he gives you sometimes when you try and flatter him because he doesn't understand because he doesn't love you, and Ranboo's going to throw up, can't get air in his lungs, hunches over and starts shaking as everything he's never wanted to hear echoes around him, "I-! I-I didn't know it meant like- that! I wouldn't have if-! I just- I do care for you but like- not as a husband-"*

*-but it'd be watching his dark eyes go wide in surprise and it is it is it is it's happening right now right in front of you oh fuck oh Ancients this can't be real THIS CAN'T BE REAL-*

*"B-But you- I-I- we-" Ranboo stutters like a dying engine, swears black smoke should be curling out of his mouth while he stalls to death, falling out of the sky falling out of reality slip away into the night, eyes darting over to the rumpled bed, thinking about every night they've fallen asleep together, how close Tubbo lays with him, the way he looks at you in the mornings love you love you so much starlight the stars he sees the universe he adores in you and yet he doesn't-*

“I-I- N-NO! I d-don’t- I- *I d-didn’t know!* I- I-I don’t wanna be *m-married!* I-It’s *not like that.*” Tubbo stresses and woodenly, Ranboo turns to stare at him, at the- *unsure uncomfortable expression dragging his face down, care for you but not like that, you’re not mine and I’m not yours sorry,* and Tubbo wets his lips, panic stricken face white as bone, “I- It’s not you, I just- I-I don’t *relationship* I-I’ve never I- y-you- *oh fuck,* I-I’m so sorry I-”

*Your cariad your one your only and even he doesn’t want you never has never will you’re delusional you’re insane you’ve fabricated this whole thing,* father whispers in his ear, drowning out whatever Tubbo’s saying but it’s better somehow, *it’s better hearing him than anything else right now oh Ancients oh fuck what are you supposed to do made the whole thing up but isn’t that what you’re good at delusions and altered realities parasocial relationships you’re a monster-*

Ranboo wails heartbroken but it cuts off weird, windpipe cinched shut hands strangling him alive, scrabbles at his throat useless trying to get them off and *you constructed your own narrative to get what you want can’t have everything you want Ranboo do you know that do you,* he said yes at the time but *he forgot he forgot selfish and terrible self-centered only think about yourself made the whole thing up forced yourself on him-*

And the room sways, reality blinking in and out of existence, *can’t breathe what have you done books sailing off the parapets what HAVE YOU DONE,* claws digging into skin too sharp like, *you’re worth nothing nobody wants you she screams throws you to the floor glass in your hands can’t breathe,* cries ragged and rough, desperate for something for someone *but he’s alone he’s always going to be alone made the whole thing up insane crazy mind cracked into two into ten into a thousand nothing right never will be-*

Hands warm like sunlight, *like love and laughter and a dozen things you’re not allowed to have,* touch his arms, wrap around his wrists try to pull his hands away from his neck but *trust me trust yourself trust him your cariad no no n-no not your cariad doesn’t want you never wanted you* and with an agonizing sob, Ranboo’s gone, drops straight through reality wishes *he’d get caught in the in between no one to find him no one would look,* comes crashing out of his jump and takes off.

It’s a struggling, staying upright, his legs shake he can’t see where he’s going, sometimes darts down warm grey halls patterned with posters and other times it’s fleeing through inky corridors glowing with teal lights, crashing into things that aren’t real, *crashing into things that are but he has to get away he has to he has to escape this escape himself-*

Ranboo’s never teleported so many times so quickly in a row, goes skipping through reality all in a bid for more distance, mind splintered into a score of silvery shards, *mirror glass in his palms shattering into a wall red rolling down cheeks like tears get AWAY FROM ME,* and he does, but no matter where he goes *eyes follow after.*

*What’s wrong with him didn’t you hear he’s insane hears things scratches on the walls unhinged dangerous* whispers after him as heads swivel and *fans snapping to cover faces and flicking eyes watching but not watching glint and flash in the gloom like gold like blaster fire barrel pointed at his head gonna have some fun first,* and Ranboo stumbles past them all head tucked to his chest wants to be alone wants to be alone STOP LOOKING AT ME STOP IT but where does he go where *does he go-*

*-screaming and hurling things at the wall but no one ever hears no one's ever there completely deserted-*

He knows where to go, *he knows where to go where no one ever is*, bare foot not even touching the ground before he's gone, comes tripping out several floors below, in one of the ancient unused hangars, *no one around no eyes no voices alone alone finally alone you're going to be alone for the rest of your life*, and Ranboo drops to his knees and screams.

It echoes back to him, *echoes inside him a hundred grating delirious wails from the things that live in the gutters that come scuttling free told you told you you'd end up back here end up alone end up with us*, and he shakes his head frantically, claws shaky and running threatening lines over his arms, so lightheaded he *can't think*.

Is there air in here, *he doesn't know doesn't matter getting choked off anyway care for you but not like that*, is there gravity he can't tell everything swims, *feet floating up from the floor tumbling down through the air falling or flying wanna find out*, no way out nowhere to go nowhere to run *he's trapped he's trapped and he's alone and he's scared where does he go where does he go where-*

*You know where to go*, a silken voice croons, frozen hands sliding around the sides of his throat, fingers feathering out under his jaw *just like a blaster could there's one on your hip you were allowed to keep it this time what good fortune but I think I know what you want*, and those hands tip his head up so Ranboo's staring straight ahead at where space gapes at him like a giant, yawning maw.

*No way back only way forwards*, she urges in a tone like scales gliding over sand, claws scratching languorously at skin, *scrape of fangs against his ankle no warning before they SINK IN spread poison that eats his flesh*, he shudders she laughs, rocks their heads together and sighs low, *you know what you have to do always known now do it right this time*.

But he doesn't want to, *he doesn't want to*, it's...there's people now, he can't leave them, but as soon as he thinks it, Reshaa howls with laughter, wraps around him like the wind up on the parapets, freezing fingers in his hair, tugs him forwards violently, *have you learned nothing no one's there no one's ever been there nobody's coming for you not after what you've done*.

"I-I haven't done *a-anything-*" Ranboo pleads miserably, flinches when Reshaa hums, *oh that's not true you know it's not you forced this relationship onto him for months how do you think that looks to others*, his breath hitches painfully, *you're Ender he's Mellifera how do you think that looks do you really think they're going to side with you*, feels like something cold and tacky is dripping down his front, out of his ribs, and Ranboo presses shaking hands to his chest, *looking for the hole-*

*They're going to think you pressured him that you took advantage of him*, Reshaa hisses, eyes flashing in the gloom hands on his back urging him forwards, *blaster in his face I said get up*, and he sits up on his knees, legs shaking already, eyes trained straight ahead, black swirl of nothing beckoning him, *wind in your hair icy fingers down your face come home know where you belong come home*.



Ranboo gets to his feet, frozen with indecision, *don't do this don't do this please remember what I told you don't hate yourself don't waste your life on this*, but her soft calls are drowned out by a maddening chorus of, *abuser enslaver entitled selfish brat think you can have everything you want think you can have him don't deserve him don't deserve anything*.

*No that's not quite right you know what you deserve*, Reshaa giggles over his shoulder, *come on brother it's just one foot in front of the other*, and that's easy, he can do that, *knows how to walk*, staggers forward one step at a time.

It's like the void of space spills into the deserted hangar, oozes over the lip of the forcefield and reaches for him desperately, a thousand inky hands flailing and waving for him, *ready to welcome him into their embrace read to welcome him home...h-home-*

He thought he knew where that was, but when he thinks about it, Ranboo realizes he's never had a home, not really. Where he was born never wanted him, where he wished he'd been born isn't his to have, the place he lives now like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, *he doesn't belong anywhere he doesn't fit not true know where you belong know where you go right over the edge-*

His feet slow to a stop at the ominous red emergency line, *CAUTION* it says like it matters *like he cares no way back only way forwards*, eyes trained on it unseeing and hollow, *no hesitation slipped right over the side one day still think about doing it*, watch his toes flex a little over the line, scuffed toe of his boot following, *one step at a time one foot in front of the other know how to walk know what to do where you belong*.

Everything dark and desiccated in his mind howls with breathless frantic joy, *skeletal hands pawing at him each thud of a palm nudging him forwards just that little more don't fight it give in what's the use of keeping something like you around no one wants you no one wants a sad broken thing so many parts missing so many things damaged never going to be right never going to be normal no way to fix this-*

Ranboo stops.

Everything cuts out for a minute- *no more grating screaming echoes no more sisters that want him dead he can breathe he can think he knows how to fix things* -ringing silence in his ears and his own too loud breathing.

He slowly looks down at his feet- *one completely over the line one part way there just one more step but which way to go know what you want what you need know what to do* -and he takes a step backwards.

And then another.

And another.

Ranboo works his way back on shaking feet, stumbles a few times but he catches himself before he can fall, comes to a stop a safe distance from the open bay and sucks in a deep breath that feels like it finally reaches his lungs, *is glad it reaches his lungs*.

*You're a failure can't even do this right can't even do this one thing*, Reshaa hisses disappointed over his shoulder, and it makes his heart jump, but Ranboo winds his arms around his chest, feels his pulse thud under his palm and the way his ribcage expands with each breath, finds solace in that as he croaks, "M-Maybe, b-but I can't change that i-if I'm dead."

*You can't change anything can't change what you are it's written under your bones in your DNA you can't fix that you can't fix something so irrevocably broken it's unsalvageable unsavable*, but she's wrong, that's not true, it's- *gentle smiles and puffy ponytails gummy candy held out to you a soldering iron next nothing is ever really broken beyond repair you just have to be willing to put in the effort you just have to be willing to try-*

"I-I k-know, I...I know h-how to fix things." Ranboo murmurs softly, sees Puffy smile at him *hears Reshaa snarl at him, you're wrong you're wrong can't fix anything only one thing to do one way forwards want to fix it so bad then do what you know you have to take that step drop over the-*

"That's not f-fixing anything...t-that's just- *throwing it away*." Ranboo brings one of his hands up and twists it, flexes his fingers, *watches the way his tendons work bones moving smoothly under skin as speckled and patterned as the swirling arm of a galaxy stardust in another form eternity at your core*, stretches his fingers out and feels a little jump in his chest, "That's just g-giving up, i-it's not giving it new life...a-a second chance."

*You don't deserve a second chance you're horrible terrible forced him into a relationship he didn't want manipulated him you don't deserve life you don't deserve to live you're a monster*, she hisses over his shoulder, and she's always behind him, never faces him, *the demon at his back*, but Ranboo sets his jaw, turns around to *face her head on*.

Reshaa is little more than a flickering outline, *a blurry distorted reflection*, skitters to the side like she's trying to hide, *trying to get away from him get at his back coward she's the coward always hiding in your shadow*, and he twists to follow her, calling, "I-I messed up. I- I-I'm not a-a great p-person, I'm selfish and e-ethnocentric, I just a-assumed he...t-that he- a-and it was wrong, I d-didn't I-I should h-have-"

Ranboo sighs hard, pain flaring up from his chest like the sharp stinging bite of chemical burns, like corrosive acid eating through his bones, *what did you do what have you done violated what you two had on so many levels never going to be the same scars fade but they don't disappear*, squeezes his eyes closed as his lungs hitch with a painful inhale, "I-I'm a b-bad person, a flawed being, he might n-never speak to me a-again...b-but that doesn't mean I deserve to d-die."

*Yes it does you're a monster*, Reshaa fires back but it's *a hand cracking into his face half lucid eyes burning holes into his head nasty smiles and sharp words never been nice never been kind you never mattered get out of my way little brother you care for her why has she always hated you*, and Ranboo snaps his eyes open, shoulders leveling out as he barks, "O-Oh yeah? If I-I'm a monster, what does that *make y-you*."

Whatever Reshaa is gutters like a flame like a- *little shadow on the wall nothing there never mattered never will*, gaping hole of her mouth yawning open and there's nothing inside, *he's*

*not sure there ever has been hollowed out shell of a thing all the lights off a devil a monster the one under your bed the one in your head never been a sister-*

“You’ve *n-never* been nice to me. *Never!*” Ranboo snaps, keeping her pinned in place with his eyes, sees the way her form curls and spits at the edges, *last sputtering flames of a dying fire black smoke pouring into the air wheezing to a standstill about time*, “I cared for you and a-all you did was *h-hurt me*. I-I didn’t deserve *a-any* of that! I tried to be a g-good brother I-I don’t know w-what I ever did wrong...”

Ranboo trails off, stares at the horrible flickering wraith of what’s supposed to be a person, *a nightmare a shadow a demon why have you ever listened to this thing why have you ever trusted someone that hates you so deeply and shallowly*, has something of an epiphany, “I... didn’t...I-I *never did* anything wrong. It was *never my fault!* It was *YOURS!* Y-You’re the terrible person, *YOU’RE t-the monster!*”

*We’re one and the same little brother same poisoned blood in our veins same void in our eyes diseased fruit doesn’t fall far*, she cackles, warped canyon of her mouth splitting wide up her face, eyes the lurid swirling color of madness and hatred, *you can’t escape yourself who you are at your core generational curse black mark on the ledger of existence grew up to be me grew up to be just like us-*

“I am *nothing* like you! I-I’m. *Not. An. ABUSER!* I-I *never will be!*” Ranboo spits, heart thundering wildly under his ribs, adrenaline spiking in his veins, thrumming under his skin like engines singing around him ready to send him streaking forwards, *away from all of this finally*, “I know *who I am!* *And it’s not a part of this FUCKING FAMILY!*”

Drawing himself up to his full height, Ranboo throws his shoulders back and cocks his chin, glaring down at the nasty little smudge guttering pathetically in front of him, “*You are nothing, you will never BE ANYTHING!* I made you and I can *unmake* you. I’ve let myself forget for far too long that *I’m* the one in control here, and I think it’s time you. *Fucked. Off.*”

Reshaa rears back, splintering form dispersing like smoke in the air, like mist burning away in the heat of the day, and Ranboo takes a step forwards, plants his feet, *life humming through him engines at warp launching him forwards away from all this leave it in his startrails*, watches her dissolve with a cocked chin, “Scuttle away little shadow, *I’ve* never wanted you...*nobody’s* ever wanted you, go ahead and disappear into the night. No one will mourn you.”

And with one last crackling hiss, she’s gone, last thing he sees those poisonous snake eyes fading out of existence, murmurs to the empty air, “I know I won’t.”

One second, he feels like he can do anything, and then the next, it’s like an entire building drops on his shoulders, and Ranboo’s knees buckle, sending him sprawling backwards onto the hangar floor, panting for breath. His heart is still beating like mad, leftover adrenaline rattling through his body, might even be anxiety when Ranboo stops and actually *thinks* about what just happened.

He almost threw himself out into space.

*Didn't.*

He *didn't* and that's the important thing, second important thing being he *doesn't want to try again*.

But if he's staying, *if he's living*, that means acknowledging that- t-that they're *not*- t-that he's- *h-he's*-

He's not married.

Tubbo's not his cariad, doesn't care for him in that way.

These last like, *Ancients of the fucking cursed Deep, four months* have been one egregious, fatal cultural misunderstanding.

And he kinda really wants to throw up.

*"FUUUUCK!"* Ranboo wails, collapses so he's lying flat on his back, and it's a little less light headed like this, but he still feels like he's spinning out of control, bombarded with *months* of memories that rip him to pieces inside, squeezes his eyes shut and just screams.

It's guttural, tears his throat to shreds, filled with every horribly desperate sad lonely thing that's clawed its way to the surface and there's no reprieve, there's never going to be a reprieve.

Because it's over, *it had never actually begun in the first place*, and now Ranboo's going to be tormented the rest of his life knowing his cariad, *his one his only his other half*, doesn't care for him in that way. He cries like a lost child, all pathetic whimpering noises and big gusts of air, feels like his chest has been cleaved open, presses shaking hands into his sternum and worries about finding the point of ribs sticking through.

What the actual fuck is he supposed to do.

Seriously.

Because if he's decided to live, *and he has he really has life fucking hurts and it sucks but it's worth it it's so worth it to see the stars and laugh and put broken things back together*, then Ranboo's got to figure out some way to move forwards.

Tubbo probably hates him, or at the very least, is beyond furious, which is entirely fair. There's not many instances where Ranboo would sit down and willingly let Tubbo scream at him, but this is one of those times, claps shaking palms over his face and groans miserably.

*Ancients*, how the fuck did this even *happen*?

But it's a dumb question, and dragging his claws down his face, pulling at his lower eyelids, Ranboo knows how. It was his own *stupid*, entitled, *ethnocentric ass* that just *assumed* Tubbo would know, that- *'oh it's common knowledge right everyone knows about me and my people and my customs because we're so fucking important'* and not, *'huh maybe I should double*

*check we're on the same page since we're from COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FUCKING PLANETS-*

*Fucking- Ancients of the Deep Void Below*, he's an idiot, he is actually a moron and he'd gladly let Tubbo fire him out of a photon cannon into the nearest sun if it'd fix things, *but it won't*.

Ranboo drops his hands off his face, stares hollow up at the hangar's ceiling, chest jumping quick and erratic under his palms, despairs because there is *nothing* that matters more to Tubbo than openness and honesty, the ability to trust the people he's close to, *to know he's not being manipulated*, and Ranboo's unintentionally broken *all of that*.

It was an *accident*, but Tubbo's not going to see the rationality of that, he'll be hurt, *betrayed*, scared that his mind's not his own, that Ranboo wormed in through the cracks and resorted things to his liking. And it's not *true*, Ranboo's just an unthinking asshole, he didn't *mean* to manipulate him, *he didn't mean to trick him accident honest idiotic mistake*, but that trust they have- *had* -is already destroyed so *thoroughly*.

His throat bobs painfully, thinking about how their friendship, what they have- *had* -could already be over, wrecked to the point that Ranboo can't even fix, *doesn't even know where to begin staring at the dented smashed blackened hull she'll never fly again*, claws tapping nervously into his collar bones.

*Apologize as many times as it takes but how do you get past this how do you get around knowing your friend wanted to be life partners still does and you don't awkward uncomfortable silences that stretch and grow pushing you two apart different rooms different ships different people at your side-*

Ranboo whines loudly, anxiety ticking up higher and higher, feels like he's going to explode with the pressures compounding under his skin, all the words and battle plans and fears and horrible *painful sunlit memories* crowding his mind. It's too much, he needs it to *stop*, but he can never turn his stupid brain off, it'll just keep spiraling and winding him up unless he's unconscious but he's not going to be able to sleep so-

Alcohol.

He needs alcohol, and *a lot of it*, flaps around uselessly at his pockets until he fumbles his handheld free, groaning and wailing seeing how many notifications he has from '<3 fy heulwen <3', *Ancients fuck me for ever putting that fucking nickname void cursed idiot moron*, slaps a hand over his eyes and taps around until he gets to the message chain he's looking for.

**Ozzi**

21:03

<< please for the love of the fucking ancients tell me ur at base

>> (づ。●\_●。)づ

>> hey hey hy Ranbobbie I see ur livin dangerous tonight no opunctuations

>> whast up wanna play some soludum or sumin

<< no I need to get durnker than I've ever been and I need you to babysit me

21:07

>> uh

>> you sure that's a good idea?

>> like I know youre an adult and all but just

>> you okay? If you need to talk about things im here

<< ozzi

<< I just found out that while I thought Tubbo and ive been married for the last four months we were not in fact on the same page

<< so yes

<< I need to get drunk

21:14

>> I

>> what

>> holy fuck

>> yeah okay u want medulis or viespatetr

<< both

>> aye aye o7

“Thank you.” Ranboo wheezes, tapping the edge of his handheld into his forehead, jolts when the thing starts vibrating, and only barely manages not to hurl it across the hangar seeing Tubbo’s contact pop up. He’s never hit *decline* so fast before, fingers shaking and coming horribly close to hitting *accept* on accident, but it just starts vibrating again almost immediately.

The picture Ranboo saved as his contact image is like a physical assault, *Tubbo with messy hair in his eyes grinning at the camera as he flips it off with a few hands so reminiscent of that one birthday photo love him love him so much and he doesn’t love you*, and it makes sobs bubble up his throat. His handheld slips out of slack fingers, hits his chest and bounces off, rattles around the floor and Ranboo ignores it until it falls silent, biting his lip hard to stop from having a full-on breakdown.

Once the call goes to voicemail, Ranboo is quick scooping it up, can’t *won’t isn’t* going to open Tubbo’s message chain, *fifty six missed messages and growing*, thumbs instead to something a little safer.

### **Tommy Innit**

20:43

>> hey look like I don’t know you and you don’t really know me but its gonna eb okay man

>> hes not mad or anything

>> don’t do anythign dumb

20:57

>> fuckin hell I know ur probably going through shit like

>> fucking hell

>> but message him if u can hes freaking the fuck out

>> like bad

>> or message ne or one of ur frends

>> just letem know ur okay

21:20

<< im safe im going to a friends I don't wana talk to him rn

>> yeah sure no problem glad ur safe

>> ur a good guy Rnaboo its gonna be okay

Ranboo's not really sure about that one, but his handheld stops vibrating like a possessed thing and he leverages his body up off the hangar floor. Everything *hurts*, feels like there's lead in his veins, neutron stars at the marrow of his bones, make getting to his feet arduous and painful, head reeling as soon as he's vertical.

But he's standing.

He's standing and he's alive and Ozzi is waiting for him with hopefully a questionable amount of alcohol.

It's something of a blur getting up to Ozzi and Monto's dorm, Ranboo ducks down into the collar of his bomber and shakes his hair into his face, only watches his feet in the fear that someone's going to try and *talk to him*, knows that if someone so much as *looks* at him kindly he's going to break down sobbing.

Of course, his mind then starts running scenarios for if he runs into *Tubbo*, *color high on his face brows drawn low how could you hOW COULD YOU he hates you you love him he's never going to love you should've left you he should've left you-*

His composure is starting to slip away, and Ranboo quickens his pace, feels like he's barely managing to contain a raging flood in his hall of doorways, black ooze seeping out from a thousand places, puddling at his feet, *threatening to swallow him whole take him under good riddance*, cannot wait to forget about every stupid way his mind works.

Thankfully he makes it unbothered, only knocks once before the door is swishing open, Ozzi standing there in some fuzzy onesie thing, holds their arms out questioningly, but Ranboo shuffles past, spots the two bottles on a nightstand and grabs the fullest one.

"Do you wanna talk?" Floats out softly behind him and Ranboo snorts, can't get the cork free with his claws so he yanks it out with his fangs, takes a generous swig, *hot slide of anise and other cloying things noxious in the way licorice is just like that birthday cake flushed face laughing eyes trying to woo my partner- shut UP-* runs his tongue over his fangs and takes another deep drink.

"H-Hey um, you doing okay there, kostka?" Ozzi asks unsure and worried, *warranted probably look completely deranged right now wrecked destroyed on the verge of collapse and*



*you are world crumbled out from under your feet*, and Ranboo looks over his shoulder, voice a croaking mess when he says, “No. Not even slightly. But I’m not going to fling myself into open space so that’s something.”

“It...sure is. Not being in open space is an admirable trait.” Ozzi says slowly, shadows jumping and waving like the way their finger bones interlock, and it looks like they want to say more, *to ask how and when and where and why*, but Ranboo stops any of that, “Ground rules. One, I don’t wanna talk about it, two, keep me from doing anything stupid like calling him, three, I’m getting blackout drunk, make sure I don’t die. Got it?”

Ozzi hesitates, which in any other instance would be a good thing, Ranboo’s aware he probably looks a little unhinged right now, but if he has to spend one more second being aware of the fact that every *I love you* spoken between them wasn’t what he thought it was, he’s going to explode.

But eventually, Ozzi caves, sighing as they bring a hand up, flicking him a lazy salute, “Aye aye captain.”

It starts off something like this, Ranboo sits in a corner too aware of everything and stewes and makes short work of the medulis, but once that’s gone, so is his grasp of rationale, and he starts pacing back and forth on tottering feet, lecturing a wide eyed Ozzi with the massive amounts of bullshit his life has descended into.

Somewhere in between the bottle of medulis and half of what’s left of the viespatetr, Ranboo has decided he’s angry, that none of this is *his fault*, oh *noooooo*, how could it be? Have you ever even *spoken* to Tubbo? M-Met him? How could you *not* wish he was your cariad, stupid fucker too smart for his own good, too kind too noble, universe in his smile eyes like the night hand outstretched to you *come with me and-*

“An’s like- s’all *his fault* in first place like...*fuckin-* stupid dimples an’ bein’ nice n’shit. Sunshine ass lookin’ mother fucker-” Ranboo articulates *very* clearly, grumpily snuggling the bottle of viespatetr to his chest, glares at nothing in particular and gripes, “*Shit head*. Fuckin’ hate’im, HEY! D-Did you’s know um...he’s a uh...he’s’a...*BITCH!* Fuckin- lil’ bitchy bitchass *bee boy-*”

Ranboo swings an arm out to illustrate the grand, sweeping point he’s just made, but stumbles back a bit suddenly unbalanced, grip locking up over the bottle under his arm, *hey look when did that get there*, lifts it and mutters sulkily around the mouth of it, “Fuckin’ hate him, s’little shit...h-hate him...f-fuckin’ hate h-him- I- I-I...n-no I l-love hi-him b-but h-he d-doesn’t- *um*, h-he d- doesn’t l-love *me-*”

His voice cracks weird and wuh oh that’s bad, because now he’s thinking about Tubbo and how Tubbo *doesn’t* love him, not like a cariad not like a *husband*, a-and what’s wrong with him, is he a bad husband, *was* he a bad husband what’s wrong with him why can’t he be loved he loves *him* so much *it’s not fair it’s not I just want Tubbo to love me I want my cariad I want my husband I don’t want to be alone again I want-*

“Hey hey hey, *Ran*, kostka, it’s okay, *Departed Ones I’m so sorry*, oh I’m so sorry.” Someone’s telling him, hands wrapping around his upper arms and it’s not the same, *it’s not*

*who he wants who he can't have*, but Ranboo breaks down sobbing anyway. This is bad, *this is really bad*, he can't breathe, feels like he's being strangled alive, *and he knows what that feels like it's okay it's okay he's dead he can't hurt you anymore*, but those hands that grin scared songbird live in his mind and they're oozing out, clawing up his legs viciously.

*Breathe in one two out one two breathe in one two out one two*, but it doesn't work, *nothing* seems to work in the moment, not even his body, and Ranboo goes pitching to the side, doesn't see a point in being vertical anymore, and cold cold hands gently pry at the bottle he's clutching to his front like an infant, "Alright okay, I think you've had enough I think it's time to-"

"*W-Why doesn't he l-love me?*" Ranboo wails, collapsed in a miserable heap on the floor, feels the bottle slip out of his arms and bawls like a child *because it's leaving him too doesn't even want him either no one does why am I so unlovable-*

"You're *not* unlovable kostka, you are starshine, you burn so bright." But Ranboo just shakes his head avidly, *no no I'm not*, chin trembling with how hard he's crying, chest hitching painfully on every inhale, corrosive hot pain flaring out along his spine, curling over his sides and burning under his ribs, right where his heart is beating, *right where it's breaking into a hundred pieces.*

Everything just seems to hit him all at once, and it's the reality that this was it, that there's no more handholding or snuggling, no more soft endearments and loving touches, no more eyes that look at him like he hung the stars in the sky, *never looked at you like that anyway made the whole thing up fabricated it all how he saw you how tenderly he spoke none of it was real placebo effect all a delusion-*

Whimpering pathetically loud, Ranboo cries like the world is ending, which it kinda is in a way, everything ripped out from under him and he's back at square one, hopelessly in love with someone that's never going to love him back.

There's a slight rustling sound and then a tingling hand is patting at his face, gets Ranboo to crack a bleary eye open, squints in confusion at the hazy blob of colors and flashing orange eyes that tell him, "I don't have any water you can drink I am going to get you a water. Just. Two seconds. Be okay for *two seconds*, okay? Don't move."

Ranboo makes some whiny noise of agreement, doesn't want to get up anyway, and the blurry rainbow thing is gone, leaving him to his little pity party for one. "Whoooo." He slurs rocking his head to the side because that's what you do at parties right, *you cheer things and cluster close sing happy birthday snarky grin cocked hip trying to woo you*, sniffing harsh with the way snot runs down the back of his throat, sees something light up in the gloom, slaps a hand around for it.

Whatever it is is a lot further away than he thought, and Ranboo rolls over, finally bangs his fingers into the slick surface, claws scrabbling against glass and smooth plastic as he hauls it closer. He groans when it finally registers that's his handheld, squints at all the notifications on his screen, *so many missed calls so many missed messages all from-*

*-bright happy laughter head bobbing along in time to a song dark velvet of the night in his eyes cheeks pinched in a grin dimples in the corners messy hair flash of your bead graceful shape of his wings love you love you more than anything a sun in mortal form your sun your sunshine your cari-*

Ranboo's unlocking his handheld with shaking hands, screen jerking around in time to his hiccupping cries, taps on the giant chain of unread messages and doesn't even make it to the first one, eyes going hazy seeing that *stupid nickname* and *those fucking hearts* at the top of the contact screen, hits *edit* without another thought.

It takes him a few tries, but he gets it, taps *save* and is exhausted by the end of it, mind starting to grey out at the edges thinks he might go cry himself to sleep, *hasn't done that in a while not since he was small and alone hey only difference now he's BIG and alone ha he's funny...*types out a very organized and conscience message before he passes out.

### **Tubbo**

24:56

^ 52+ unread messages!

>> fuck please be okay

>> all I want is for you to be okay

>> dont care if you never speak to me again just be okauy

1:27

<< lo so lik32e im n sorryw an stuff bt like eyah idk

<< ur the oly kne for me honest idk what im gonna do

<< ik now yo3e donte love m3 n that's oki made the whole tihgn up sorry so swrry bo ddnt mean it sorry foe it

<< llik yeah

<< jus plez don stop beqni my freiand plz in= need you

<< sorr im durnk not like newd you like a hubban sorry

<< immagot to bed

<< forige me

After much fumbling, Ranboo somehow manages to get his handheld turned off and flings it away from him, arm falling limp to the floor and he turns his head to stare at it listlessly, something digging into his cheek uncomfortably. He only picks his head up enough to poke around curiously, finger freezing when it dances over the shape of his bead, *can I braid your hair never thought you were gonna get to do this do you think it's long enough you're about to cry he's not*, feels like he swallows his tongue whole trying to clear his throat.

*So nervous to ask him sat there in breathless joy never thought you'd get to do this*, and slowly, painfully, he works the bead loose, *how many times he practiced until he could do it right how good he got near the end like he'd done it his whole life would do it his whole life*, but that's not true, it's not going to be like that, it was *never* going to be like that, *I love you murmured afterwards like a promise but it's not it's hollow lights off inside because he doesn't mean what you mean*, and Ranboo starts undoing his braid.

## Chapter End Notes

Reminder: our story isn't over. I don't do sad endings.

I hope you've enjoyed! I'm also hoping to get the next part out as soon as I can, I have a lot going on in my irl life and I'm working as quickly as I can.

As always thanks for reading and I'll see ya soon.

-Hellen

# Inner Core

## Chapter Notes

Our journey ends, I hope you've enjoyed the ride <3

Lastly, a gentle, lovely reminder that all tags still apply and are referenced and discussed throughout the work. If any of it is upsetting or triggering, please read with caution. De Terra deals with heavy themes and topics, but is overall, a story of healing and moving on. It's just hard to get there sometimes.

Really. Really long note to follow.

Also, trust me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### **Lesson Seventy-Six: Know your place know your duty, never waiver**

They gave him a single room again this year, *of course they did it's what you request every year and who's going to turn down Zeetho's fucking son*, and it's as nice as a dorm can be nice, but at the moment, it's never felt more like standing in the doorway to a jailcell.

One of Ranboo's hands is locked and braced around the edge of the doorframe, knuckles bleeding ash grey with how hard he's gripping, doesn't know if he's trying to force himself forwards or back. *Forwards forwards it's always forwards it's always over the side give in give up you know where you belong*, things giggle from the gutters, from doors that hang off their hinges, everything in disarray since he came back from *there-*

*Hazy woozy walls and floors dark slick of his own blood hands holding him down knife at his throat spiderweb of scars jagged stump poking out of hair matted with blood your blood your reflection hate it hate it so much collapsing in the tiny bathroom of the Eshachi walls closing in can't breathe can't-*

Ranboo tries to blink his eyes and get rid of the fog clouding them, but it doesn't work, *it's still there*, draped over reality like a rough spun sack, and the skeletons howl delightedly from their unchained doors, *give in give up stay here you know where you belong and it's not out there not with the stars not on that ship not with him-*

His claws flex into the wooden frame, sore and aching from scrabbling frantically at concrete floors, but the pain helps drag him out of his head, has him seeing his room for what it really is, *just a room*, just a small space to not sleep and take his evening meals *alone-*

*-sitting across from him lantern throwing his face into sharp relief he laughs at your jokes he smiles at you meets your eyes heart beating out of time what is this doesn't matter know your place know where you belong-*

Ranboo shakes his head harsh and pushes himself forwards, *he has things to do to unpack he's staying he decided he's-* only makes it as far as the center of the room before his feet are stalling, stuck frozen staring out the tall, arched window that faces over Mahari, back towards the north side of the city, where the spaceports are.

Where he left Tubbo.

*Hair messy and disheveled desperate hope in his eyes that's dying faster than you have time to think and then he's gone stumbling back stumbling away but it's better this way it's better he leaves without you can't do this to him can't bring all your ghosts and ghouls into his life it's not fair not to him anyone but him-*

Nodding his head dejectedly, Ranboo knows they're right, stares at the light going ruddy gold as the sun sets, brings his hands up to clasp behind his neck and tries to figure out what feels off about the gesture. His claws flex at his own knuckles, trace over them like *memory of sun bright fingers wiggling through yours never been touched like this never been so warm don't leave can't go know your place-*

And he *knows* where his place is, and it's not out *there*, not where nebula swirl like oil slicks and comets sing and sail through the night, it's....*not with him.*

That's right, *t-that's right*, Ranboo knows what he's supposed to be doing, *get his degree get another score well make his family proud get a good position on the imperial senate serve his planet serve his people serve his family*, and his hands tighten frantically around the back of his neck, panic seeping up from under his ribs.

Hearing it like that, *it sounds like a death sentence*, like being led by the hand up to the palace's roof, forced to stand on the parapets, *blaster at his back in his face gonna have some fun first know your place know where you belong not with him not out there fuck can't breathe hands around his throat can't stay here no way out only one way out want to die help help h-help HELP J U M P-*

Ranboo jolts, hands shooting up the back of his neck and into his hair, claws frantically carding through the short strands, do nothing to calm his pounding heart, and his mind plays back for him *blunted nails scratching across his skin blazing burning heat never been so warm never felt so alive don't leave please let me stay he offered you froze he ran you wanted to follow after why didn't you why didn't you-*

*Because you know your place raised you well a good prince a good son*, Meleeri praises, *or orders*, he can never tell, but it doesn't make pleased tingles race up his skin like it has in the past, sounds hollow compared to *good shot sharp eyes you're incredible kinda amazing you know that.*

And he *doesn't* know that, has *never* known that, but it feels like he might've been able to learn it, if he had more time, if he had a chance.

*You do*, she whispers and Ranboo whips his head to the side, desperately searching for any sign of her, so rare that she visits *treasures every second don't go please stay take me with*

you, and breathy laughter is at his ear, her perfume washing over him, *incense smoke and stardust.*

*I'm here I'm always here I'm always with you told you I'd never leave you my darling one my littlest,* mother whispers, curling closer, drapes over his shoulders like a heavy, comforting blanket, *do you believe me do you trust me will you listen,* and he tips his head into hers, promising on a whisper, "A-Always."

*Then go,* she hushes, hands settling over his where they're clasped on the back of his neck, a gesture he can't ever remembering doing before *walking along at his side down dusty roads hands on the back of his neck worrying at each other or flexing his arms out grinning and now you do it too mirroring copying mannerisms of the person you might be bound to the one you're never going to forget have to forget you can't go wit-*

*Yes you can,* mother whispers in a voice he swears he's heard somewhere else, dipping and pitching like the rise and fall of song, *like engines singing under his feet hyperspace streaking past everything you've ever wanted but been too scared to take,* and starlight fingers fit under his jaw, slowly tip his head up so all Ranboo can see is the setting sun and Mahari's spaceport, *go you know where you belong go with him take his offer fly out today see the stars don't look back.*

Departing ships wink and flash in the golden light, *like shining beads reflecting in dark hair smile that goes from tired to beautiful as she moves forever into your mind never left you not really,* and Ranboo swallows hard, mother crooning from over his shoulder *from up above him in the voice of a thousand twinkling lights a million worlds a once in a lifetime chance everything he's ever wanted in an outstretched hand be my partner join the Syndicate come fly with me-*

*Go,* mother breathes and he *moves,* starts throwing things into the closest bag he can find, pries his circlet off his head and leaves it rattling against the wood of his desk as he bolts out of the dorm, feet flying fast over white marble, doesn't want to miss him *doesn't want to be too late,* mother's voice carrying far above his head, sailing off into the jewel toned sky like the rumble of fading turbines, *travel the stars see the universe that loves you come find me come find yourself.*

**You were supposed to ~~sit and listen~~ you weren't supposed to go**

--

Something flashes by out in deep space, hurtles so quick Ranboo would've missed it if he blinked, makes an educated guess it was probably a meteorite or something given its overall size and relative speed. He waits patiently to see if there's more, *maybe it'll be a shower wouldn't that be nice wonder if he'd like to sit with me his head on my shoulder tail around his waist miss him miss him so much-* but Ranboo slams the door shut on all that, nervously taps his paper against the floor, tries to find something to distract himself with.

Space sprawls before the observation deck's windows, a depthless void with a thousand catching stars that shine and throb, winking navigation light of ships coming and going,

bright flare as they jump to warp, leave afterimages seared into his eyes until he blinks, wipes them from existence and waits for another round to bloom to life.

Ranboo feels like his stomach is in knots, claws nervously shredding the paper he's been crinkling to death, fussing at the corded bracelets on his wrists, keeps fidgeting with excess energy fueled by adrenaline and nerves. *Ancients*, he wants this to be over already, to get rid of this aching, sick queasy feeling that sends his pulse roaring and spiking, whites his vision out as *panic* swallows him whole, like the unforgiving inky black of the sand seas.

Checking his handheld for the time like he has been these last ten minutes or so, another shot of nausea lances through him, heart tripping sick and fast in his chest. Ranboo hunches over to prop his elbows up on his crossed legs, hands clasping the back of his neck, *almost fifteen minutes late fucking hell where is he you just want this to be over already doesn't he maybe he doesn't care maybe that's why he's not here take a hint get a clue he's done with this done with you isn't even going to say goodbye-*

A door creaks behind him, Ranboo whipping around fast, heart in his throat *terror in his lungs going to be sick going to throw up its over its done here to say goodbye*, swallows hard seeing Tubbo frozen in the open doorway, one hand braced on the door, others all balled up into fists, and fuck, he was not prepared for how much it hurts to see him, *like a knife through the throat*.

They haven't spoken in a few days, play ping pong with their messages, always waiting long enough so they're not actually texting at the same time, just leaving little notes for the other to read later, *so they have time to go hide so they don't have to talk don't actually have to have a conversation*.

*I'm not mad at you*, Tubbo sends over and over again, always the first thing he says and the last, but Ranboo doesn't know if it's the truth, keeps deleting his own truths before he can send them, *I miss you I love you I wish things could go back to the way they were I wish you'd never found out-*

That last one is horrible, he's only ever spelled it out once, when it was late at night and his eyes felt like they were filled with sand, deleted it frantically and turned his handheld off, stayed curled up in a ball on Ozzi's floor the rest of the night, trying to be quiet as he cried, trying to be quiet as he mourned everything he'd lost.

And seeing Tubbo right now, standing a mere fifteen feet away, but knowing he's not allowed to hold him anymore, card claws through his hair or down his wings, knowing that it's over *that it's done*, that he's *not* Ranboo's husband, *never has been never will be*, feels like a slow death.

Finally easing forwards, Tubbo lets the door swing soundlessly shut behind him, drops his eyes to the floor as he shuffles closer, head hanging between his shoulders like he's accepted defeat, *like he's given up like it's over like this is the end came to say-* only tips his gaze back up when he's a few feet away, "H-Hey..."

He's got dark circles under his eyes, skin around them red and irritated, *fingers digging into eyes wiping away the tears that won't stop can't sleep isn't sleeping and it's because of you,*



and Ranboo feels like he's inhaled a mouthful of sand as he croaks back, "H-Hey."

Tubbo fishes out something from one of his pockets, and for half a second, Ranboo loses grip of reality and thinks *it's his bead*, but it's too big, it's...just a can, alternating dark and light greens. He woodenly takes it as Tubbo holds it out for him, hand dropping away fast before they can accidentally brush, "I um...sorry I-I'm late I uh...I stopped by the mess to get you a ginger soda...f-figured you might um...m-might be anxious."

The can is lukewarm in his hands which means it just came out of the coolers probably, *thought about you thinks about you knows you so well he at least still cares*, and Ranboo looks up at him helplessly, for once, is glad Tubbo won't meet his eyes, "I...t-thanks."

He nods his head and moves to sit down, not close enough that they're touching, but a friendly distance, *but there's still that distance now*, and the two of them sit for a second and try to figure out where to go. So much has happened, it's a little hard to remember the beginning, when *partners* meant teammates and not *my forever*; when *I love you* was just a thing Ranboo heard in his dreams and Tubbo didn't look so scared to open his mouth.

Back when things were easier, when Ranboo hadn't gone and mucked it all up, so desperate to be loved he was willing to take whatever he could get, even if it came at the cost of the relationship he held the most dear. If there are any mercies in life, and Ranboo is fervently hoping there are, if he's done this right, things should go back to how they were before Apidae, *before Tjhia-Yuet even*.

Go back to what they always should've been, *partners as teammates as friends that's how it should've stayed but you couldn't control it let it spiral out of control became a monster you couldn't tame and now look where you sit-*

Space unfolds in front of them like the most mournful of gifts, and sitting side by side, staring out at it, reminds Ranboo of sitting somewhere else, staring up at a red sky with sand under his palms and a thousand opportunities burning just out of reach.

*Looking over at him in the fiery light seeing the joy and wonder on his face as he stared at the stars something turns over in your chest breathes to life what is this*, and what Ranboo wouldn't give to go back through time and snuff that spark out, to cup it in his palms and gently curl his fingers over it.

*What a mess you've made*, father sighs and distressingly, Ranboo agrees with him, wishes he'd been stronger, that he could've seen the reality of the situation sooner, because despite everything he and Tubbo have been through, it somehow feels like they're further apart now than they were back then.

"How do...h-how do you wanna do this?" Tubbo asks softly, but all it sounds like is *I don't know where to start how to try and fix this*, and smoothing out the wrinkled to shit paper, Ranboo clears his throat, *heavy doors swinging open before him stepping out onto center stage know what to say know what you need to say*, tongue thick and heavy in his dry mouth, "I um...c-can I s-start?"

"Y-Yeah, um, yeah, go right ahead."

He can see Tubbo turn to look at him out of the corner of his eye, but Ranboo only has eyes for his paper, neat lines filled with his cramped, shaky scrawl that he spent the better half of the night agonizing over, wanted every word to be *just right*, doesn't want to say anything he's not supposed to-

*Love you miss you please stay don't go stay with me I'll do anything I'll behave please please-* cracking boom, *slam the door shut it out calm down you have this under control you have it under control this time chains rattling into place like they mean it*, and taking a deep breath, Ranboo starts reading.

"Tubbo, you have no idea how *incredibly* sorry I am. Please believe me when I say I really do have the utmost respect for you as a person and individual, a-and-" *Fuck*, his voice just cracked, can't be doing that already he's barely a quarter of the way through, *deep breathes deep breathes you can do this you can say this you can tell him goodbye*, "-and I really had no intentions of forcing you into anything. *P-Promise, I...I-I didn't mean to I-*"

And now he's off script, *refocus back on your paper stop adlibbing or it'll come spilling out love you need you don't go please stay cut it oUT*, "It was incredibly self-centered, incredibly narrow minded of me to just assume you understood my planet's customs, and I *cannot* apologize enough. I...thinking I *f-forced* anything on you, t-that I *violated* you in any way, is-"

"Stop."

Ranboo has never snapped his mouth shut so fast in his entire life, *this is it it's over can't fix it tried but it's too broken really is goodbye he's going to swap partners*, claws punching straight through the paper they're grey knuckled over, heart thundering so fast its making his hands shake, and reality trembles at the edges as Tubbo says low and firm, "I need you to look at me right now- *p-please*, I- c-can you please do that for me, Boo?"

*I'd do anything for you*, Ranboo almost says like an *idiot*, and he's always been helpless when it comes to Tubbo, laboriously drags his head up and tries not to flinch when he meets Tubbo's eyes, a roaring wave of, *I love you I love you I love you*, cresting over his head and threatening to drag him under.

Tubbo looks every bit as tired and haggard as Ranboo feels, *has he been losing sleep has this been weighing on him too*, but there's a fierce fire burning in his eyes when he says, "You did *not* force me into anything, okay? Y-Yeah, I um...I-I didn't know we were uh, t-that *you* thought we were, ha, *um*, y-ya'know? B-But I um, I-I did uh, I did everything- *like*, the um, hand holding and uh, *b-bed*, because I-I *wanted* to."

His face is very red by the end of it, antennae twitching and wiggling anxiously, but he refuses to look away, meets Ranboo's stupefied expression with a shy tilt to his brows, fingers picking at each other in his lap. "*Fuck me*, t-this feels like grade school or some shit..." He huffs, ducks his head while he takes a deep breath, collects his thoughts, and Ranboo's mind *spins*, *is he saying no way not possible don't can't not like a husband he said not like a husband but where is he going he wanted to hold your hand wanted to share a bed he wanted you is he does he-*

“I-I...I think I kinda...*like you*.” Tubbo says it like it’s a question, peeks up at Ranboo through his bangs and there are too many things happening at once, a giant ball of muddled, miserable feelings *elated feelings*, treasured memories and ones of despair all snarled together, and it’s just been dumped straight into Ranboo’s lap.

*He doesn’t know where to start.*

“I-” Ranboo blinks, brain shorting out, *way he looks at you in the mornings it’s not like that I don’t love you like that wanted to do those things not like a husband don’t wanna be married think I kinda like you*, “W-What? I...I-I don’t- I-”

“Y-Yeah, I- i-it’s confusing, I know, I um, *okay*.” Tubbo blows out a heavy sigh, rolls his shoulders and taps the fingers of his upper hands together and apart, “I...okay so um, I-I’ve never been like. *Interested* in p-people before so t-this is um, n-new to me, and uh, w-when I found out that we were um, ya’know, m-married? I...panicked a bit.”

That’s understandable, he has every right to those feelings, *what a terrible jolt what a horrible thing to find out suddenly*, and Ranboo’s going to say as much when Tubbo keeps going, “B-But I had some time to think and um, I-I kinda realized this earlier? B-Before we crashed on Shouko actually, but...yeah...b-but i-it’s just...I-I don’t *know*, I j-just, I like you.”

For a second, Ranboo thinks he might pass out, such a strong rush of vertigo and relief, *is this relief he doesn’t know didn’t say love he didn’t say love liked he said liked what does that mean what does he mean*, and his mouth is so dry, words coming out tacky and stuck together, “I- I-I...but you *s-said*- a-and I don’t- I-I don’t *understand*. A-Are you saying that...t-that you l-love-?”

“Ah, okay, look. I think we um, I-I think we’re getting some stuff lost in translation.” Tubbo hedges sheepishly, fingers tapping together and apart rapid fire, *did he get that from you is he doing that because of you does he love you*, “W-When I say *I love you*- t-to you, I-I mean it like how’d I’d say i-it to my *mom*. T-To *Tommy*. Like. I-I care about you a lot but like, you’re family, *k-kinda*, but it’s...not like, a spouse thing...make sense?”

“I- w-what? But h-how does that- you- I-I-” Ranboo stammers, trying to wrap his head around the concept of *I love you* being used with *family*, *with multiple people like it’s something anyone says to each other like it’s not the most personal and precious thing in existence stronger than gravity like the bonds that hold atoms together two halves of a whole reuniting only one for me*-

But it doesn’t sound like it means that for Tubbo, i-it *sounds* like he means *I care for you, hands ruffling your hair tweaking your nose darling one macabre smile and head on upside down lays with you on the floor while you sob kostka affection burning so strong in your chest but it’s different its different planets different customs different understandings oh no*-

He stares at Tubbo confused and worried, tender, fragile *stubborn* hope struggling to grow in his chest, and Ranboo can’t get the words out, but it looks like Tubbo’s putting the pieces together anyway. *Lost in translation lost in the stars lightyears apart thought you were so close but you’re on opposite ends of the universe*, and Tubbo sounds terrified to ask, *like he’s afraid of the answer*, “W-What does...um, w-what do you mean when you say *I-I love you*?”

*Only one for me no one else will fit dual orbiting suns ties like molecular bonds a singular entity broken apart but reunited through us it's you for the rest of existence my other half everything I never knew I wanted that I was missing that I can't live without my heart my sunshine my-*

"E-Everything." Ranboo wheezes, crumples over to rest his elbows on his knees, the hope that'd been building yanked right out of him viciously, and he slips his eyes shut, voice tripping up weird, "*I-I love you* doesn't just mean *I-I care about you d-deeply*, I- i-it means this is it, *this* is w-where I'll stand for the rest of eternity...a-and I don't think that's what you want."

It goes deathly silent after that last word warbles free, and it's answer enough, *that's it it's over got your answer knew what it was going to be don't act surprised care for you but not like that never like that*. The sobs are coming, Ranboo can feel them, building up under his ribs like sandstorm clouds on the horizon, inky and dark and full of *freezing grating particles tearing at his throat*.

When Tubbo swallows, it's audible, sounds like he's got something stuck down his throat too, "I...y-you want to b-be with *me f-forever*?"

Ranboo barks out a hollow laugh, finds bleak amusement in how shocked Tubbo sounds, like he can't put two and two together and see how much Ranboo cares for him, and running his hands around to the back of his neck, Ranboo squeezes gently, "I thought we were *married*, Tubbo. Of *course* I want to be with you forever."

"H-Holy shit- Queens I- I-I'm sorry I don't know i-if-"

"Don't." Ranboo begs, cry punching out ragged with the word and he gives up on trying to stop them, *different people different planets can he even feel for you the way you feel for him*, letting his shoulders shiver and shake as he snuffles, "P-Please just- *don't*. I-I...I *get it okay*? Y-You don't h-have to say it. *I get it*."

*Care for you but not like that come from separate places unique peoples it's not the same we're not the same the way I feel for you isn't the way you feel for me*, and a soft wail spills free, *sand slipping over the parapets head disappearing under dark granules got you and they're never letting go*, claws raking back through his hair, the entire unbound curtain of it, *had everything and lost it not true can't lose what's not yours*.

"I'm sorry." Tubbo insists anyway, tears in his voice now too, *this thing between you ripping you both to shreds unstoppable gravitational force orbiting suns knocked out of alignment going to destroy one another*, "I just...d-don't know i-if I *want* that kinda commitment like... I-I like you, can't we just- go back to how things were? N-Not put labels on this? Just...be us?"

*Go back to holding hands but with the intention of letting go crawling into bed into each other's arms but not with the promise of staying you saying I love you and meaning forever and he meaning for now*, and all of Ranboo's hair bristles, low growl rumbling in his chest as his ears flick back, indignation and agony lighting up under his skin, because that's his *cariad*, *that's his cariad telling him he wants no strings attached*.

There's nothing casual about being cariards, it's not something you fall into and out of like the sand tides, it's a *promise, written in your blood written in the stars*, something as constant and unwavering as the ground under your feet, steady and rock solid, or, *it's supposed to be*. Ranboo knows he loves Tubbo with all the searing promise of eternity, has been treating him as his forever for *months now*, and if Tubbo hasn't felt anything like that by now, *he's never going to*.

"I-I want that kind of commitment." Ranboo hisses, drops his hands and looks up at where Tubbo's staring at him with a pinched expression, brows drawn down low and mouth pushed to the side, tears brimming in his glassy eyes, "I *want* forever, I- y-you're my *carriad*."

"I don't know what that *means*." Tubbo pleads, and it's insane to think, that if Ranboo had simply recited the ceremonial words the first time he braided Tubbo's hair, none of this would be happening, shudder rolling up his entire body as he huffs broken, "I-It means you're *it* for m-me, *m-my one and o-only*. There'll n-never be anyone else, i-it's just *you* Tubbo, f-for the *rest of my life*."

"I- how c-can you be so *sure*? We haven't- we haven't even *known* each other that long and like- *you wanna spend the rest of your l-life with me*? I- I don't understand." Tubbo rears back a little, like he's trying to get out of the way of an oncoming attack, hands checking his wrists for gold bands, *for shackles scared trapped nowhere to go no way out*, and why is he reacting like that, what's he worried about it's not like there's anything to...oh.

*Oh.*

Ranboo hadn't even thought about it like that, how Tubbo's core traits could bleed into the way he views personal attachments, and it's only hitting him now, how Tubbo is inescapably and devastatingly a pilot at heart. The drive to go, *to see to do to leave things in his startrails*, so ingrained in him it means he's not looking for anything permanent, *he's not looking for eternity*.

And it's not like Tubbo doesn't care for his friends, *for his family for Ranboo*, but...*he values his freedom more*. It's why he's here, with the Syndicate, still out running missions and traveling the stars, risking his neck instead of finding some out of the way planet to settle down on and lead a quiet life.

Tubbo doesn't want a quiet life.

He wants adventure, *freedom and opportunities and being with Ranboo costs him that-*

"Like, *forever*. A-Are you sure? *Really*? I just- n-not trying to shit on your customs, but like, what happens if you fall out of love? What happens if you meet someone else?" Tubbo's rambling, *throttle all the way down engines at warp flying full speed ahead never slows down doesn't want to wants to be free*, "I...I know you feel like this *now*, b-but things *change* Ranboo-"

"Not for me." Ranboo croaks hoarse, feels like he *finally understands*, and his heart is breaking into two into ten into a *thousand*, "T-There's no falling out of l-love with a carriad,

it's a truth that was written in my b-blood the day I was born...it's part of my DNA, *w-who I am-*"

*You'll know when you find them*, and he did, felt it sweep through him like solar winds, all consuming and obvious, just like the unstoppable reality of knowing it's only one sided, *because Ranboo wants to stay and Tubbo wants to go*, and he laughs so miserable and *lost*, "I-I was *made* to love you...b-but I guess you weren't made *to love m-me*."

The end of his sentence pitches up sharply, and Ranboo jerks his head away, hair falling like a curtain as he blatantly hides, masks the way his brows curve sharply inwards, but does nothing for how his shoulders shake, clear indicator for the cries that ache and *burn* under his ribs.

That's it...it's over, *it never started*, father points out unhelpfully, *how can you mourn something that was never there that wasn't even real*, but it was *there for Ranboo*, it was *real to him*, and he slumps over further, feels like he's had a neutron star dropped across his shoulders.

*I'm sorry oh I'm so sorry*, mother hushes gently, frozen hand smoothing across his back, lightening the load marginally, *shouldn't have happened shouldn't have been this way not like this don't let it end like this*, and Ranboo knocks his head into hers, whispers, *I have to*.

And he does, this isn't something he can force, *would never be something he'd force*, and if what Ranboo wants doesn't align with what Tubbo wants, he just...has to let go, *to move on*. Except there's no moving on from this, not really, Ranboo's never going to forget Tubbo, his heart will always know him, always look for him, but that doesn't mean he has to listen to it.

"I...*f-fuck*, I-I really don't k-know what to *say*." Tubbo wheezes like he's had the beating of a lifetime, and it sounds like he thinks he *owes* Ranboo something, like somehow any of this is his fault and he needs *to apologize*. He couldn't be more wrong, this entire mess is *Ranboo's* fault, should've sat down with Tubbo at the beginning and explained things, made sure they were on the same page, but he didn't *think about that*.

He was just so *afraid* of ruining things, always had the half coherent thought at the back of his head that if he did *one* thing wrong, Tubbo was going to leave him, forced his mouth shut and kept him on his best behavior. It's a bit late for an epiphany like this, but Ranboo is suddenly and painfully aware of the fact that he was so scared none of this was real, that at the start, he hadn't wanted to question things out of *fear of being proven correct*.

*And look where that landed you right where you always feared you'd end up*, Ranboo thinks bitterly, sucks in a shaky inhale through his teeth, forces it into his trembling chest and waits a beat, *already lost your cariad now one misstep away from losing your best friend fix it you have to fix it*, lets it go and says as evenly as he can, "You d-don't owe me *a-anything*. T-The only things y-you need to say are i-if you forgive me and....a-and if you want to c-change partn-"

"NO!"

Ranboo jumps at the sudden volume of his voice, shakes his hair back and stares at Tubbo wide eyed. He's leaning forwards across the floor, lower right hand braced against the carpet to help keep him upright, such an agonized look on his face it makes whatever's left of Ranboo's heart dissolve away into loose sand.

"I-" Tubbo starts and stops, face crumpling inwards like a piece of buckling hull, and the tears finally slip free, race down his cheeks like shooting stars, "I-I mean, I...i-if that's what y-you want b-but *I don't*. I...I don't wanna stop being partners- *being* f-friends with you, Boo, *I really don't*."

"I don't either." Ranboo whispers, ducking his head as his lower lip trembles, *distance between them growing eventually becomes too big to cross different rooms different ships different people at their sides*, ears pinned back flat, "I d-don't wanna *lose* you, I- a-and I'm s-scared *I-I have-* oh, Bo, oh I'm so s-sorry, *I-I'm-*"

There is the briefest touch at his knee, so featherlight and so fleeting, Ranboo thinks he's imagined it for a second, but he catches the darting blur of Tubbo's arm moving back, hears him hush, "You haven't lost me, I-I'm still *here*, I'll always- *I- um, shit...* I-I don't know what- h-how to say...b-but you're *my friend*, and y-you always will be, okay? A-And I do forgive you, I was *never* mad Boo, I know it was an accident. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I-I thought you were m-my *husband*." Ranboo grumbles wetly, sniffs hard and focuses on his breathing, abdominal muscles starting to hurt from the amount of crying he's done, hears a sharp inhale and glances up pointedly at Tubbo. *See did something wrong makes you scared makes you uncomfortable*, the arch to Ranboo's eyebrow says, and Tubbo's so stubborn, so *impossibly stubborn*, narrowed eyes snapping, *nuh uh no it's not going to argue with you think I'm going to win know I'm going to win*.

*You can't win everything*, Ranboo wants to say, more exhausted than he's ever been in his entire life remembering, *you can't have everything you want Ranboo*, and *Ancients*, has he never understood that more.

"It was an *accident*. You weren't trying to trick me or anything...it was just an accident." Tubbo stresses, upper hands gesticulating to emphasizes his words, *slicing and waving through the air cut it out knock it off I'm right you're wrong*, and his antennae bob up and down real quick, "And I...I'm sorry for not realizing sooner...how much this all meant to you."

"None of this is your-"

"Ranboo I swear." Tubbo huffs tired but fond, barest quirk of his lips up as he shakes his head, "If you're blaming yourself for not knowing about *my* culture, I can do the same. I should've asked what the braids meant sooner, I'm sorry."

"You didn't know." Ranboo murmurs, but Tubbo dips his head forwards, mouth set into a firm line, "I should've *asked*."

It falls off into a solemn silence, the explosive, mounting tension from earlier long gone, but it still hurts, twinges and throbs along the edges, *what could've been what never was what*

*hopefully will be*, but it's better, kinda like the aching relief of having a wound cleaned. *Maybe we'll have a chance to heal now to move forwards*, Ranboo thinks, knows there's no moving on for him, that he's going to love Tubbo until the day he dies, but he's well versed at hiding that.

*Wall it off close the doors spiral that maze tighter throw up chains throw up locks wish you could forget stop trying to remember move on walk away leave it all behind you if only it'd stay gone this time...*

But...Ranboo thinks it might, because now, whenever unrealistic hopes rise, he can sit them down and play again the memories of Tubbo sitting across from him white as a ghost, stammering he doesn't want an eternity together.

"So...where does that leave us?" Tubbo asks unsure, but he doesn't seem as far away as he did earlier, like they're not in different galaxies anymore, just on different planets, and Ranboo can work with that.

Hauling himself upright, he methodically stacks everything up in an empty room, *all the I love you's and quiet mornings hands in your hair caressing your cheeks dancing and laughing and sitting close enough their knees brush*, locks it all away with chains made from *care for you but not like that think I like you but not enough to promise*, suggests just as hesitant, "F-Friends?"

But despite his best efforts, the word still rolls off his tongue hollow, can't even come close to defining the massive swirling nebula of emotions Ranboo feels for him, *only one word that can my one my only but you're not his and he's not yours let it go*, and he's not sure he can, but he's going to have to learn how to.

"I- y-yeah. Friends." Tubbo agrees slowly, like he's unsure too that Ranboo's going to be okay with that, but he is going to be okay with it *knows how to behave*, and to illustrate his point, Ranboo sticks a hand out for them to shake on. The warm prickle of Tubbo's palm hits like an electric shock, *don't go please stay made for you but you're...not made for me*, and for the first time, Ranboo's the one to drop the contact, to move back, *to let go*.

And Ranboo wishes he could say that things go back to normal, but they don't, and it's so bizarre sitting across from Tubbo, *across not next to never again*, this monstrously awkward thing wedged in the middle, both of them struggling to come up with things to say. It feels a little like revisiting a book you once knew by heart, could almost feel the words under the pads of your fingers, but suddenly being unable to read, are left staring blankly at pages that once held such meaning and are now rendered void.

"How'd you find out?" Ranboo says before he can think better of it, mind a weird, jumbled mess where he sits slouched against a wall in the repair bay, absentmindedly running through his PT exercises while Tubbo fiddles with the Eshachi. He hadn't meant to say it out loud, it was just on his mind, *everything has been keeps running back through it all obsessively builds nausea like storm clouds*, and his head has been so scrambled from anxiety it's not thinking clearly, has already let slip several things he'd rather have stayed with him.



*Threw myself off the palace one day been in love with you since Tjhia-Yuet so cold without you at night,* and all of it makes Tubbo flinch, tortured expression pulling his face down so bad, Ranboo's been trying to control it better, but his brain is fried, can't keep anything together.

For half a second, Tubbo doesn't act like he's heard, and Ranboo frantically hopes the faint banging and rattling he's making was enough to drown out the hazy question, but then Tubbo looks up and Ranboo realizes the hesitation was just because he doesn't *want to say it*.

"I- *um*, Jack, my old classmate he um- when I called Tommy t-that night he- h-he popped in to say hello and-" Tubbo shrugs, going back to whatever it is he's working on, hair shaking down into his eyes, "He recognized it immediately, he um, he takes a lot of intergalactic relations classes so. Y-Yeah."

"Makes sense." Ranboo murmurs distracted, getting sucked into a horrible scene his mind is too excitedly building for him, *Tubbo laughing and joking around with Tommy bead catching in the light the questions that come up the explanations he doesn't have the one he doesn't want to hear fingers frantically trying to undo the braid as fast as possible pulling out all the care and love woven in there because it's not wanted because you're not wanted-*

*What did you expect honestly I've always told you the truth you just never listen,* father muses off to the side and Ranboo leverages himself to his feet, room spinning a bit from headrush, and he might tell Tubbo bye or he might just leave, he's not too sure, just know he needs to be somewhere else *now*, ends up on the observation deck and tries to forget who he is staring out at the stars.

It's hard readjusting, but Ranboo's done it once before, *dark halls teal lights eyes and daggers winking in the gloom melting into warm grey walls colorful posters hearty laughter and genuine smiles*, and he knows he can do it again. He makes a list of rules he needs to follow and plasters it up everywhere in his maze of hallways, reminding him to step back step away if he sways too close, to not voice the affections that simmer under his ribs like noxious fumes, to try and keep his distance.

They stop sharing a bed and both of their sleep schedules go out the window, hard enough adjusting to being alone again, but the added stress of this whole fiasco spurs on a vicious round of nightmares for them both. Ranboo can never remember his clearly, Tubbo wishes he couldn't, half the time one of them wakes up screaming to find the other crouched at their bedside, trying to calm them down while the room fills with smoke and rumbles like a ship falling out of the sky.

It's so tempting to give in, *Ancients it's so tempting*, but Tubbo only suggests it once after a few days of little sleep, question quietly hushing out in the dim space of their room, *what's the big deal just so we can get some sleep used to share hammocks with cousins all the time*, and Ranboo stares dead up at the ceiling and croaks out, "No. I-It's a *big deal* t-to me."

Physical touch is not something he's ever done with *friends*, barely even with family, and it's not fair to *himself* to get his hopes up like that, to fall asleep in Tubbo's arms with the deluded notion it means something. So neither one of them sleeps for a while, but they learn to be alone again, and Ranboo thinks that's going to be the end of that, *no more casual touches no*

*more fingers laced together or hands in his hair*, but then *he* has to start sidestepping Tubbo in the halls.

Ranboo keeps finding fire bright fingers touching at his hands or trying to curl around his arm, has to break contact before he can sink into it like he *desperately wants to*, and it just keeps *happening*, Tubbo reaching out for him like nothing's changed.

"I'm *sorry*. I-It's just...*muscle memory* o-or something." Tubbo pleads after Ranboo's snapped at him, tone growing sharp and mean like it only ever gets when he's strung out emotionally. It'd been a long day, he was tired, his hands won't stop shaking and he'd broken something at the repair shop because of it, old fears and worries eating him alive *did his head heal correctly will his aim ever be what it was*, so he really didn't need his ex...*whatever* trying to hold his hand on top of it all.

"It's...fine." Ranboo huffs, raking claws back through his hair, and it's really gotten long, tickles down past his shoulders, *maybe he should get it cut what's the point having it long anymore*, twists a lock of it around his finger as he sighs, "Just...try not to o-okay? I...I'm trying to forget and it doesn't *help*."

And yeah, Ranboo can't forget anything but he's trying to for once, throws himself into doing whatever he can that will take his mind off Tubbo. He puts in extra hours at the repair shop, lets soldering sparks zap his fingers instead of electrical touches, actually starts learning proper hand to hand combat from Dream, stays late until his body is aching and he can drop into bed and not miss two sets of arms, hides out in Ozzi and Monto's dorm more often than not, starts to know everyone on their hall better than his own.

Ranboo remembers something Ozzi told him once, *don't mind the extra work helps keep the depression at bay*, and he finally sees they were right. Staying busy keeps Ranboo's mind distracted and lures it away from spiraling too far off the deep end, only downside being he hardly spends any time with Tubbo these days.

It's...not like they *never* see each other.

They go their separate ways in the morning sure, and Ranboo doesn't bring him lunch anymore, but they usually catch dinner together, sit on opposite sides of the table and recount their days, always try to drag stories out so they're not left in awkward silence. Sometimes their other friends join them, and it makes everything so much easier, conversations flowing fluidly once there's a big enough group to hide their awkward silences behind.

"Oh! Hey! Ran! We still good for training later?" Ellov asks when there's a break in conversation, all eight of his eyes blinking at different times, weird little quirk Ranboo begrudgingly finds endearing, and he nods, agreeing easily, "Yeah, of course. Same time as usual?"

"You know it." Ellov grins, red teeth startling against those night dark gums, claps Ranboo on the arm good naturedly, spindly fingertips drifting up to tug on the end of his ponytail lightly, "Make sure you tie this back better or something, yeah? Don't wanna step on your hair again."

“I will, I will.” Ranboo reassures lazily with a wave of his hand, flicking his head and Ellov’s fingers drop away, and the conversation moves on like it always does, Ranboo not realizing until they’re on their way back to the room that Tubbo has been quiet for *a while*.

“You good?” He asks softly, really has to squash the urge to reach out and touch him, trail fingers along his shoulders or bat at his wings with his tail, and it takes Tubbo a minute, but he eventually responds, “I...yeah. Yeah I just...how long...have um, h-have you and Ellov been uh, *sparring*?”

That’s not really what he was expecting, but humming in thought, Ranboo works back through his mental calendar, eventually lands on somewhere close to when they got back from Shouku, after the medics had cleared him for more strenuous exercise, “Uh, probably a few weeks? I usually meet up with Dream but he’s out on a mission right now, why?”

“I just- a-am I not *allowed* to know things about your life or something?” Tubbo snaps, hunching down into the collar of his jacket, stiff set to his shoulders screaming *looking for a fight leave me alone defensive don’t test it*, and Ranboo backs off, leaves him to stew while he responds to some of Ozzi’s messages.

Tubbo’s been doing better than he was, but it’s still rough going some days, these horrible back moods of his rising up out of the abyss and yanking him down into it, turn his attitude more sour than anything. It’s harder navigating them now, Ranboo can’t touch and provide comfort the way he used to, more often than not just has to sit and wait for Tubbo to ride it out, offering words of support if he wants them.

And given the way he stomps around their room, Ranboo doesn’t think he’s in the mood to listen, scoops his gym bag up and figures it won’t hurt to be a few minutes early, let Tubbo have some more time to himself. Ranboo’s looking for spare hair ties, has been working on keeping his half of the room more orderly but those things are small and *disappear like crazy*, when Tubbo grumbles petulantly behind him, “I- you know you can always ask *me* to spar with you.”

They’ve never trained hand to hand before, and it used to be Ranboo never asked because he was worried about his temper, about accidentally hurting Tubbo, but he’s been doing better lately, a lot better actually, doesn’t think it’d be the end of the world for them to spar. “I- y-yeah, yeah okay.” Ranboo relents, stops his searching for sentient hair bands that grow legs and hide from him, but Tubbo doesn’t look happy about that response, crosses his arms and huffs, “Okay? I-I’m not doing anything tonight, so why didn’t you ask me then?”

“Because your *arm is broken*?” Ranboo’s voice pitches up incredulously, little confused over what Tubbo’s so irritated over, is equally if not more confused when his face bleeds red, antennae jumping all the way up as he flings his hands out, “I-I *know that!* I just- meant like- *a-another time or something!* I- just- UGH! *Whatever!* It’s fine, don’t be late ‘cause of me.”

So Ranboo’s not, heads out to meet Ellov and they spend a good hour or two trading blows, pack it up and call it a night when Ellov trips on nothing and Ranboo’s yawning so wide his jaw cracks, and it’s not that late when he gets back, but all the lights are off, angry whine of too loud music leaching out of earbuds and Ranboo sighs, crawls into his bed and hopes things are better in the morning.

They are and also are not, Tubbo's speaking again, asks Ranboo questions about how his night was and makes a few lame jokes, seems fine one minute but then is storming off in the middle of lunch the next, and it only gets worse as days pass, his temper narrowing down to a razor thin wire that is so easily tripped.

"What's *bothering you?*" Ranboo asks over spilled tools and parts flung on the floor, stands across from Tubbo and *his* messy half of the room, drags him out of the cafeteria and away from a shouting match that was about to turn physical, and Tubbo bows his head, arm out of its cast and all four hands clutching at his hair, "*I-I don't know-*"

He's never been this confrontational before, tries to pick a fight with anyone that looks at him funny, has even gotten unreasonably snippy with their *friends*, is borderline insulting to Ellov if he'll even speak to him in the first place, nearly bites Dream's head off one day in the cafeteria, glares at Ozzi for seemingly *no reason*.

And it's so hard watching Tubbo grow more irritable and waspish, but Ranboo doesn't know *what to do*, asks him if he wants to talk and he doesn't, can't hug him like he used to, can't tell him he loves him *like he used to*, can only remind him he is cared for and a good person, maybe spread a friendly hand out along an arm if he so dares.

Ranboo has to be careful though, everything he is so desperately wanting to shorten the distance between them, that he has to remind himself to move back, to not get caught up like a planet under the unstoppable sway of a blackhole. He still loves Tubbo, *is always going to love him it's part of who he is*, but if Ranboo doesn't watch it, he'll start to slide, start trying to convince himself it's okay, that *something* is better than *nothing*.

Maybe a no strings attached kind of deal works for some people, but it won't for him, Ranboo knows that much for sure, refuses to take the significance of what a cariad is and make it out to be anything less. If Ranboo can't have the commitments he needs, he doesn't want anything, would rather sit quietly with unrequited feelings burning under his skin than slowly watch their relationship fall apart, *as they steadily grew to hate one another*.

"Aren't you being a little too fatalistic?" Puffy asks over their shared project, the needlessly complicated and electrical wiring nightmare that is Techno's trident, and Ranboo pretends like he's too busy resplicing wires to answer.

Maybe it is a little too fatalistic, but Ranboo is painfully aware of what he's like, knows that if he tries for casual and no promises, he's only going to start pushing more and more for Tubbo to commit, to sit down stay in one place, *put his braid in Ranboo's hair promise there will never be anyone else*, and that when he *doesn't* get, resentment is going to grow like an invasive vine, strangling whatever they could've had.

If Ranboo wants Tubbo at all in his life, *and he does more than anything*, it's safer to stay friends, to ignore how his heart lights up when Tubbo smiles at him, to turn a deaf ear to the way the cosmos spins around him, demanding he completely the loop, finish the equation, *reconnect with his other half*.

But Ranboo learns to ignore it, goes about his life, puts one foot in front of the other, tries to help fix the Eshachi and the nasty, complicated thing he and Tubbo's friendship has mutated

into, but a lot of the time it seems impossible, like they just don't know *anything* about each other anymore.

"I- *w-what are you reading?*" Ranboo demands alarmed, thought he recognized a sentence or two when he discreetly peeked over Tubbo's shoulder earlier, *wait... WAIT oh holy shit he's not can't be why would-* and Tubbo scrambles to cover the screen of the holo-tablet, tips of his ears bright red, stuttering, "I-! I-I just- I-look, I-I'm practicing uh- *p-practicing reading Enderian a-and-!*"

"*With romance novels?*" Ranboo eeks out in a higher pitch, face equally as darkly flushed because *oh sweet Ancients that's one of the gooiest ones the one with that scene you like about the light of the universe in the cariad's eyes fucking hell why did he pick that one why is reading it at all-*

"I j-just-!" Tubbo stammers, turning a fraction and side-eying Ranboo shyly, hesitant expression quickly getting swallowed up by angry defensiveness when they make eye contact, "W-What? Is it- can I *not- like*, show a-an *interest* in the things you like anymore?"

"I- I-I mean *s-sure*, b-but I read other things ya'know." Ranboo stresses and wrings his hands together, embarrassed beyond belief over what Tubbo must think of him now, reading the sappy confessions of love and undying devotion that have always pulled at Ranboo's heartstrings, "I- if you wanna r-read something I like just- I-I can recommend you some scientific journals? Ones in Enderian even for the uh...f-for the language practice."

And it's absolutely bizarre, but Tubbo doesn't look relieved about not having to read what he once called, *those goofy romance books moms like*, antennae flicking out to the side as he passes his tablet back, let's Ranboo pull up something he hopes he might enjoy, mumbling quietly while he scans the article, "I um, y-yeah thanks."

He still hasn't read past the introduction a few days later when Ranboo asks, blusters his way through some excuse about being too busy finalizing the last of the repair work, but all Ranboo can think about are the many times he's caught Tubbo with his tablet out, and for his own sanity, doesn't ask what he's been reading instead.

Things are messy, things are complicated, Ranboo keeps stepping back in the hopes that it's going to fix whatever it is that's off between the two of them, but it's like every time he goes to pull away, *turn his back shake his head keep the words locked behind clenched teeth*, he's propelling them further and further apart.

"Hey um, m-my birthday's coming up, I'm going home...and I was...wondering if you wanted to uh, come with me?" Tubbo haltingly asks where they're both sitting in the Eshachi's restored cockpit, eyes glued to all his screens while he makes sure everything's working like it's supposed to, but his antennae are flicked in Ranboo's direction.

"I-" Ranboo starts and stops, doesn't know what to say, can only think about the last time he was on Apidae, *how much has changed since then oh Ancients of the fucking Deep does Cissan know*, nervous spike of panic making his tone jump into something harsh, "Why would you want me to go with you?"

Tubbo stills in what he's going, hands resting limp on the controls, defeated set to his shoulders as he turns to face Ranboo, looks at him like he's not sure who he's looking at, "Because you're my...um, y-you're my friend."

But he doesn't sound sure, like it's finally getting to him too, the weird silences the way things don't feel like they match up anymore, puzzle pieces they thought fit together perfectly only to find out they're from two separate puzzles, don't make anything when you cram them together.

"I'll go if you want me to, but don't feel like you have to invite me. I'll be okay on my own." Ranboo says and turns back to reconfiguring his gunner controls the way he likes them, heart in his throat but thankfully out of his voice seeing that haunted look on Tubbo's face, terrified to admit to himself he feels it too.

The insurmountable divide growing between them.

"I...want you to go." Tubbo whispers and *Ancients*, his voice, *worst fear worst thing you've ever seen him kneeling broken with a prison jumpsuit across his shoulders and hands shackled behind him never were worth anything*, and Ranboo would do *anything* to get that hell out of his voice, is quick to stammer, "A-Alright then, I'll go."

And they sit in a silence that only grows more tense with every passing second, going through familiar routines in a space they both recognize and don't, and even though they're within arm's reach, could so easily stretch a hand out and touch one another, it feels like they're thousands of lightyears apart.

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### **Lesson Fifty-Nine: ~~You will do as you are told~~ you're tired of being told what to do**

Ranboo drops to his feet lightly on the metal grating, slinks along above the refinery's main production floor, glad at least that years of sneaking around the palace are finally coming in handy. *Only thing you're good for are situations where no one needs to notice you, isn't that pathetic*, Reshaa croons over his shoulder, and for half a second, his shadow *is her shadow*, stretching out long in front of him from the blazing light of the Moontide circlet, *aw such a good little shadow nothing to notice nothing to miss hey what if you jumped off-*

*No go away leave me alone I'm just trying to do my mission*, Ranboo yells back, boots stepping light and soft over rusty metal slats, barest sound drifting up at all, bites his lip to stop the groan that wants to tumble free hearing a deep, *mess it up is what you mean why are you here why do you think you can do this what's even the point you're a failure through and through-*

*I am NOT-* Ranboo stresses, but father and Reshaa just laugh and he hangs his head, feet stalling in place, unsure suddenly on what he should be doing, uncertainty leaving the door wide open for Meleeri to stride through barking, *unacceptable disgrace raised you better than this raised you not to go traipsing around like a renegade vagabond what are you doing what were you thinking-*

*I'm sorry, Ranboo apologizes feebly, wrong thing to say princes don't apologize, and Meleeri scoffs, toes of her boots tapping a quick pattern into the catwalk, already forgetting everything I taught you but you should know better be better you know this isn't where you belong this isn't your home come back come do your duty serve like you were meant to.*

It's an argument he's heard every day for over a month now, gets accosted any time he's on his own, when indecision sets in, when Ranboo looks around and it feels like he's come up for air, *like he's waking up from a nightmare*, realizes that nothing is the same and has the agonizing thought of, *what is he doing what has he done.*

*You've made a mistake is what you've done but we're all used to cleaning up after you,* Meleeri huffs, sharp thwap of that crop striking her palm, and Ranboo flinches, ears dropping knowing that means *another thirty repetitions no excuses no whining back straight chin level feet together speak clearly you halfwit-*

*"Hey, Boo, you good? I'm in position, just waiting on you bossman."* Crackles through one of his ears, and *warmth* courses through Ranboo like the sun's just come out, settles the spiraling doubts and insecurities, sends the specters all scattering back to whatever hellhole they crawled out of.

*It's okay it's fine he knows where he is breathe in one two out one two yeah just like that Boo he's okay,* and reaching up with one of his hands, Ranboo tabs the receiver, keeps his voice low but understandable, "Yeah, I'm good. S-Sorry, just trying to be careful."

*"Yeah no I totally understand, take your time and call me if you need, okay? You're doing great, by the way, real proud of you, Boo."* The end of his sentence slides up into something undeniably fond and *proud*, and Ranboo's tail curls behind him pleasantly, affection he can't stop leaking into his own voice, "All thanks to you, Bo, you're a great teacher."

*"Yaaaah! Look at me! Best criminal there is lads!"* Tubbo crows, does some mock cheering trying to mimic a stadium full of delighted fans, and it's really not that funny, but Ranboo has to clap a hand over his mouth anyway, attempting to muffle the giggles that spit out between his fangs.

He picks his pace up, darting down the catwalk to make up for lost time, finds the control room easily enough, and with a quick use of what Tubbo endearingly calls, *the universal lockpick*, Ranboo shoots through the keypad on the door and wiggles his way inside. Unfortunately the same tactic won't really work on the line of blinking panels in here, but Tubbo gave him a rundown of how to disable the security system before Ranboo made his jump and he follows along to the memory now.

*Excited way he talks with his hands how many different facial expressions he makes so open so emotive you adore it adore the way he steps closer adore the way he nudges you playfully you just adore him think you might actually love him really and truly think he might be your ca-*

Something buzzes against his leg and makes him jump, but thankfully he was at the end of the shutdown sequence and only ends up hitting the last button with a little more force than strictly necessary. Ranboo shakes his hands out and fumbles for the receiver, unease curling

under his thoughts like cobras under sheets, shakily says, “H-Hey, it’s um- i-it should be good now f-for you to uh- t-to land and stuff.”

*“Ten four, I’ll be right around...you okay? You sound a little shaken up.”* Tubbo asks quietly around jumping static, distant whine of the Eshachi’s engines in the background, and listening to them helps ease Ranboo’s jackhammering heart, *does nothing for the leady weight in his pocket what he assumes is waiting for him on his screen your highness this is the fourth time would you just-*

“I- y-yeah, yeah I’m fine.” Ranboo tries to lie convincingly enough, hopes Tubbo will drop it, can see figures flickering at the corner of his eyes as fishes his handheld loose, clicks the screen on with something like morbid curiosity and feels his insides lock up.

### **Handler Three**

10:00

>> Attempting to touch base with you again, your highness, on when you plan on returning home after the term is over. There are only so many transports headed to Nirox, and it would be regrettable to expend resources shamelessly. Please respond at your next earliest convenience. As always, your exalted father, King Zeetho First of His Name, long may he reign, and your honored siblings send their well wishes.

His claws scrape ugly sounding across high quality metals and glass, find the shallow gouges he’s scratched before and rend them deeper. This is the fifth message Ranboo’s gotten along those lines, *are you listening stop ignoring us expected home even though no one’s noticed you’ve been gone send their well wishes do they even know do they even care you’ve been gone for a month and no one’s mentioned it-*

That’s the worst part, he’s been gone for so long it should be noticeable, the Academy has likely unenrolled him from his classes by now but not one message has mentioned it, no, *where are you we’re worried*, just, petty quips and passive aggressive comments, like he’s an annoying package they’re trying to schedule a pickup time for.

*Don’t know what you expected*, Reshaa hums, solid, freezing weight along his back, *get off me go away*, he wheezes, distracted by the looming figure out of the corner of his left eye intoning, *always said we never wanted you now here’s proof*, sharp crack of a riding crop into a palm, *but you’ve always been slow you’ve never learned you’ll always be a disgrace to your family.*

Ranboo starts to bow a little under the pressure, all three of them bearing down and trying to crush him out of existence, *maelstrom in his head under his skin in his eyes in his veins generational curse*, thoughts whipping past like inky, furious coils of black sand, drive into him like a palm cracking into his cheek, *we never wanted you no one has ever wanted you no one ever will go take that long walk off a short cliff why don’t you just-*



*JUMP* they all howl as one, and Ranboo cries ragged through his teeth, hands clutched in his hair, head pounding and reeling, can see the catwalk beckoning to him, flailing, waving shadow hands reaching out whispering faintly, *know where you belong know what you need to do know what you want-*

Staggering to his feet, Ranboo *doesn't think he's going to but but that allure is always there*, and then he catches a glimpse of his reflection, freezes seeing mismatched eyes shining in the gloom, faint orangey light from the smelters glowing across the high points of his face, *the distinctive jacket across his shoulders HIS name stitched on the front held out to you in offering brilliant smile twin dimples you're one of us now that means we got your back.*

And palm spreading out over the insignia on his shoulder, Tubbo's voice in his ears, *you're a part of the Syndicate that means you don't take shit from anyone got it*, other hand tightening over the handheld, *over- expected home expect you to do this go here be that listen to us obey us but I don't I don't I DON'T*, and Ranboo strides out onto the catwalk, cocks his arm back and hurls the handheld into the refinery with a feral shriek.

He doesn't see where it lands, but steps up to the railing as close as he can, fingers wrapped crushingly around the metal support while he leans out, keeps his feet firmly planted and yells, *"Fuck you! FUCK YOU! I-I'm done with you okay? I'm not going back! I'm DONE!"*

It's just his own voice that echoes back to him, but that's gratifying in its own way, *I'm here I'm alive you're not getting me I'm not going back I'm not listening to you*, and relaxing back on his heels, Ranboo takes a second to breathe, heart roaring in his ears and it's never sounded lovelier.

**~~You are a disgrace to your family fuck them~~**

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"I- w-what in the world is *that*?" Ranboo blurts out, sitting forwards abruptly in his seat, refrains at least from spreading his hands out against the viewport like an excited child, but only *just* barely.

"S'just the forest." Tubbo mutters, tone clipped and tense, has been the whole flight, but he refused to admit anything was wrong, pretended like Ranboo couldn't see the death grip he had on the controls, anxiety pouring off him in waves as he basically had a panic attack on and off for the last sixteen hours.

This is the first time they've been out since the crash, *the first time Tubbo has flown since*, and it's really taking a toll on him. Ranboo's heart constricts painfully in his chest watching him flinch when the Eshachi rattles, hands jerking on the controls like they never have before, jaw tensed and angry as he breathes harshly through his teeth.

Tubbo was so wound up, he hadn't even put any music on, kept them in whirring silence the entire way, but that was okay, the Eshachi sang her song for them as she tore through space like a comet, Ranboo humming along quietly to the rise and fall of her engines.

He'd missed her so bad, hadn't really realized the full extent until he could feel the faint tremor of turbines spinning at top speed, settled back and was lulled into half sleep by the contented trilling of their ship, hand dangling over the side of his chair and spread comfortably against the floor.

Dropping out of lightspeed woke Ranboo up a little, but existing Apidae's atmosphere and seeing the planet's surface kicked him completely awake, couldn't stop the excited questions tumbling out of his mouth as they raced over the fiery tops of trees.

"It c-changes *color*?" Ranboo breathes amazed, eyes greedily taking in all the warm hues before him, adoration for this planet cementing itself into his bone marrow, doesn't think he's ever going to find someplace as beautiful in the rest of the galaxy.

"Yeah? You...didn't know that?" And Ranboo doesn't want to look away from sunny yellow and burnt orange leaves, but he thinks he can hear a small smile in Tubbo's voice, twists to check and is rewarded with the faintest quirk of lips. Tubbo is still facing forwards, probably won't be comfortable taking his eyes off what he's doing for a long time, but Ranboo can see where his brow has smoothed out a little, some of the tense lines etched into his face easing up.

*I did that*, Ranboo thinks delightedly, tail waving behind him contentedly, *I helped I can still help him*, and he props his arm up on an armrest, nestles his chin in an open palm and asks brightly, "Do they do that every year? It's really enchanting. Oh, do you know what causes them to change colors? Is it in response to the time of year or...?"

And the more Tubbo starts talking about fall leaves and the bite that seeps into the air, colorful gourds and warm spices, the more he relaxes, like his mind isn't caught up and gummed around in thinking about all the ways things could go wrong, like he's brought back to *here* and *now* and not stuck in *back there* and *then*.

It's early morning for this section of the planet, sun just starting to rise as they buzz low over grass covered roofs that are going deep golden brown in the autumn chill, smoke spilling out of chimneys that's whipped into a frenzy with the Eshachi streaking past. Tubbo lands out in the same stretch of fields as last time, but all the grasses have been cut back, leaving peeks of bare red earth and leftover short nubby stalks that crunch under their boots.

Ranboo can't help the little disappointed noise that leaves his mouth seeing the shorn field, really liked the memory of brushing his hands through waving, ticklish grasses, and Tubbo turns to him with a cocked brow, asking without asking, and Ranboo sighs, "It's silly, *really*. I just didn't know these got cut back and I...miss the way it was in summer."

"Yeah it's...used to feed animals and stuff like that for winter, but it'll regrow next year... we'll just...have to come back then." Tubbo huffs fondly from over his shoulder, duffle bouncing against his back as they make their way to the dirt road that cuts through the fields. *Not sure about that not sure I'm coming back*, Ranboo thinks with a deep pang of sadness, knowing that by next summer, things will probably be evened out, that Tubbo won't feel like it's an *obligation* to take Ranboo places with him anymore.

This could be the last time he's on Apidae, and it's such a sobering ache to realize that Ranboo figures he might as well make the most of it, enjoy what he has while he has it. He could mope and brood the entire time he's here about this being the end, but what's the point of that, it'd completely ruin any enjoyment left to be had.

The sun has just crested the tops of the trees by then, throws brilliant shafts of light out in front of them, hitting warm against Ranboo's back, and he stretches languidly, eyes squinting shut for a minute. Living in the moment was always a concept he struggled to understand, mind a dozen moves ahead, *a score of years down the road*, overthinking and overanalyzing, controlling and trying to plan for every last little thing, but all that left him with was a sick stomach and jittering anxieties.

And it's not like it's easy letting go, Ranboo knows himself and knows he's always going to be a little neurotic, but he can force himself to take deep breaths, to stop and listen to the wind in the trees, appreciate the sun warming his back and the earth reassuringly under his feet.

He can finally get himself to just appreciate being alive, can recognize that for the miracle it is.

Avelare is a lot cooler this time of year, especially early in the morning, Tubbo's breath fogging where he walks a little ahead of Ranboo, and while it might be a better temperature for him, Ranboo finds himself missing the sweltering sting of summer. The wind is temperate against his face, sunlight not so strong where the planet is rotating away from Kisen, no bugs singing in the light of early morning, few hearty wildflowers just beginning to die back, but otherwise, the sides of the road are barren.

It's still beautiful, he still adores this place so dearly, it's just different, and as Ranboo watches vibrantly warm leaves swaying in the breeze, loose ones falling and ruffling past, he thinks he'll come to adore Apidae in a new way just as strongly as before.

This time on the way into town, they're not ambushed by their gaggle of children, Tubbo telling him they're all probably either at school or helping out with chores, but they do bump into townsfolk on their way to work, and it breaks Ranboo's heart a little more every time.

The first group of men they come across look like they're going to cry when they spot Tubbo, pull him into hug after hug, each one whispering some iteration of *glad you're home glad you're okay thank the Queens you're safe*, brush antennae together like they're trying to make sure he's real, that he's here, *that he's alive*.

Hands are held, arms are clasped, his brow gets kissed a few times and several of the people they meet *do* start crying, one woman thumbing at Tubbo's scarred cheek like she can brush the marks off that way, whispering shaky under her breath in Apian, "*Oh honey, oh I'm so sorry, so sorry my boy. G-Glad you're okay, glad you made it back to us.*"

And then when she catches sight of Ranboo, *how could she miss him long lanky shadow looming over them all*, she promptly bursts into a new round of tears, detangles from Tubbo and reaches out for him. He hesitantly slides his discolored hands into hers, unease working out of him with the way she rubs thumbs across his knuckles, staring up at him with shining

eyes stammering fast in broken standard, “T-Thank you- I- t-thank you f-for b-bring him home- I- grazie mille, tesoro.”

“Por certo, signora.” Ranboo says in his best Apian, hopes he rolls the vowels correctly and the woman breaks out into wet but delighted laughter, nothing mocking in it as she hauls him closer, just surprised joy while she switches languages seamlessly, crushes Ranboo in a hug and tells him over and over again how thankful she is.

She’s not the only one, apparently the entire town seems to know *he’s* the one that pulled Tubbo from the burning wreck, and they layer praise after praise over his shoulders, crown his head in their undying gratitude, bless him with their tears and sincere smiles. Ranboo has mechanics offering him any help he might need for broken equipment, bakers asking him what he likes to eat, promise to be by later with treats, starry eyed children peeking out from behind their mother’s skirts, shyly telling him he’s their hero.

“I- *w-what?*” Ranboo stumbles out in standard, so perplexed after the first little boy says it, and the child dips out of sight quickly, his mother patting him on the head with a soft chuckle, looking up at Ranboo as equally as awed and shrugs, “They all look up to Bo, melli, and since *you* saved him...well...you’ve captured yourself quite the little following.”

“I- I-I just did what anyone would do.” Ranboo mumbles embarrassed, *means it though*, doesn’t know who could leave their partner in a situation like that. He just did the bare minimum anyway, and Tubbo still wound up hurt, but the woman smiles beautifully, shakes her head with a soft laugh, “You’d be surprised, melli, but sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, *thank you*. I’m so thankful you were there to help him...I’m so grateful he has you.”

Ranboo tenses up immediately, hopes no one else notices the way he goes rigid, nasty voice of his father whispering, *he has you doesn’t want you and you don’t have him you’re barely friends anymore drifting away into the void nothing left to hang on to*, and Ranboo works his jaw back and forth, politely thanks the woman before moving on.

Tubbo won’t look at him afterwards but that’s nothing new, and Ranboo bitchily kicks at small rocks in the path until he realizes he’s being an *ass*, that the way Tubbo’s hunching into himself doesn’t have anything to do with *them*. It has everything to do with the one thing he *refuses* to acknowledge, would have to be close to the end of the world for Tubbo to actually talk about the crash, *how it made him feel how insecure he is now terrified to sit in his flight seat avoids mirrors avoids looking at his right hands if he can*, and now he’s getting bombarded with it.

It’s harder when they actually get into town, denser concentration of people, and they mean well, they were all so worried *they care so much*, but Ranboo can see Tubbo shifting awkwardly out of his peripheral, knows he’s got to be uncomfortable with all this attention focused on him, on the burns he likes to pretend aren’t there.

There’s an older man trying to sympathize with Tubbo over his melted wing, *and it still works he can still fly*, but it’s damaged and it’s never not going to be and Ranboo knows he hates it, steps in between the two when it looks like Tubbo is going to crawl out of skin. With years of court training simmering under his smile, Ranboo extracts them easily from the

conversation, manages to dodge and bullshit his way out of any more interactions as he hauls Tubbo up the hill to his mother's.

"T-Thanks." Tubbo croaks once they're on their own again, sounds like he's barely keeping it together, and this is one of those instances where Ranboo feels like it's okay to touch him, lightly places a hand on his shoulder and murmurs, "Of course, I...I've always got your back, okay?"

Nodding his head a few times, Tubbo leans very briefly into the contact before seeming to remember and takes a quick step to the side, wet exhale rattling out of his mouth while he sniffs loud, rubbing two hands into his eyes in an effort to stave off the tears. Attempting to give him some privacy, Ranboo turns the other direction, distracts himself with the pretty gardens flourishing in front of cheerily painted front doors, acts like can't hear the quiet sniffles on his right.

*I wish I could take this from you I wish it had been me*, Ranboo thinks, tail lashing behind him angrily, but he can't and it drives him up the wall, *that's his husband his person and he hurts*, doesn't know how to show comfort and care in a way that won't sound like love, settles on a very stilted and formal sounding, "Yr wyf yn galaru gyda thi."

"I...I wha-? S-Shit, *shit s-sorry*, I- I don't really um, sorry I don't-" Tubbo's mumbling thickly, and Ranboo looks over at him, eyes glassy and skin around them red, cheeks glistening a little with scrubbed off tear tracks, repeats it quietly in standard for him this time, "I mourn with thee, it's...it's said at um, like funerals and things like that. Times when another's grief is so much...it's like y-you feel it yourself. T-The full expression is, *'I mourn with thee, thy pain is mine'*."

"I...*s-shit*, y-you...you really f-feel like that?" Tubbo whispers hoarse, eyes wide and unsure, and fuck, maybe it was too much, but Ranboo didn't know how else to express himself, drops his eyes to the red dirt under his boots and sighs, "Y-Yeah, I...I hurt because *you* hurt, I wish...I-I wish that I could do something to *help you*...I wish it'd been *me*-"

"*Don't*. D-Don't you *even*-" Tubbo snaps, unsure expression melting away like ice in a supernova, replaced with such a complicated mix of fiery emotions Ranboo can't breathe for a second, still somehow taken off guard by the fierce protectiveness Tubbo radiates, "I'm *glad* it wasn't you, okay? Queens, I'm thankful everyday it wasn't *you*. It's m-my fault we crashed, my stupid ass *deserves this*-"

"*You do not deserve this*." Ranboo seethes as he stretches up to his full height, looming over Tubbo who only defiantly glares back in his face, stupid chin stuck out in that *impossibly* stubborn way he has, and Ranboo loves him so much *but he wants to throttle him*, "You are a *good person*. Your worth is immeasurable and you matter *so much*- a-and not just to *me*. There are so many people in your life who care for you and want only the best."

Tubbo's brows draw down, *storm on the horizon wants to argue is going to argue never knows when to shut up and trust*, and bulling over whatever *stupid, inane* thing that was about to come out of his mouth, Ranboo says, "I care about you so incredibly much and *I'll be damned* before I *ever* let something like that happen to you again. You have *my word*, Tubbo."

Sometimes Ranboo wonders what he looks like when he gets like this, if his emotions bleed through as strong as Tubbo's own, and he thinks they might, at least now, watching the complicated way Tubbo's face contorts, things he doesn't have names for but has felt so *viscerally* burning bright in his dark eyes.

*Something between us hard to explain hard to describe but it's a blaster aimed at the back of a scaly head no hesitation knees cracking into concrete floors hazy words barely remember but I came to find you I'd always come back for you know you're there know you anywhere he hurt you I let him hurt you-*

And in that instance at least, they feel like themselves again, like these last few weeks just drop away and take their impossible snarl of emotions with them as they go, and it's just them left, Ranboo and Tubbo, back to back heads bent together side by side, the way it always should have been, but then reality rushes back in and it's not so simple anymore.

Breaking eye contact first, Ranboo looks up the road to where Cissan's house is, morning sun slanting across his face and making him squint, fall breeze tangling through his too long hair, *remember when fingers used to remember when you used to have a braid when you used to have a cariad*, and he sighs, nodding his head, "Come on...your mom is probably waiting on us."

The rest of the short walk feels like an eternity, boots crunching over loose stones echoing back like the crack of blaster fire, and Ranboo's pulse ratchets up seeing that little blue door come into view, can only think about the last time he was here, *racing off in the morning sun thought he'd just gotten married small hand on his arm keep watching out for my boy keep him safe burns across his skin wing crinkled in you promised you failed-*

Ranboo swallows harshly, suddenly terrified because he knows Cissan *knows*, but *she hasn't seen*, and that's her son, *her only child cares about him so much would give anything for him and he's hurt was hurt proof of that tattooed over his skin for the rest of his life*. His tail whips behind him, fingers curling into fists because does she know about everything else, *the marriage*, what will she think then, seeing him, *there's Ranboo the manipulator the relationship fabricator delusional psychopath that let her son down that couldn't get him out fast enough that let him burn-*

"She's not going to be mad at you." Tubbo murmurs, jolting Ranboo out of his spiral, and he whips to stare wide eyed at Tubbo, wry, crooked little grin tugging his lips up, "Oh, don't give me that look. I *know you*, can practically *hear* you overthinking, Boo."

"I-" Ranboo starts and then doesn't know what he's going to say, *I know you* whispering through his head like the beginning dangerous curls of a sandstorm, and Tubbo steps closer for a brief second, hands touching lightly on Ranboo's back and send his head spinning before they're gone, "She's not going to be upset, *promise*. Fair warning though, s-she's probably going to cry...a-and...a-a-and so am I."

His voice cracks slightly, broken up by the mounting pressure of sobs gathering under his ribs, and Ranboo's own chest feels like a dagger is twisting into it, *sorry so sorry you have to deal with this that I wasn't fast enough that I let you both down*, follows along silently like he's on his way to the gallows as Tubbo steps up to the door.

He hesitates the briefest bit before knocking with his left hands, and it takes a second, but then the door is easing inwards. Cissan's trying to smile, *trying so hard to put up a brave face*, but then she actually *sees* Tubbo, *registers the scars understands how bad it must have been and that's her son that's her baby*, and her smile crumples inwards, sobs spitting out of her mouth as she surges forward and hugs him tight.

He's taller than her, but in the never-ending power of mothers, she gets Tubbo tucked under her chin, muttering furiously into his hair as tears stream down her face, a half coherent litany of lyrical words pressed into the crown of his head, *I love you I'm so sorry my baby you're okay love you more than anything thank the Queens you're okay that they brought you back to me love you love you love you.*

Tubbo buries his face in the crook of her neck, and like promised, he's bawling too, hanging on to her like his life depends on it and Ranboo has never felt more like an outsider in his entire life, *he shouldn't be here not his place not his family*, edges backwards so he won't disturb them as he steps through reality. He remembers the coordinates well enough, drops himself out further up the road, where it just kinda peters out into rolling fields, steps into thigh high grasses and starts walking, doesn't really have a destination in mind.

Further out in the field, but not too far from town, is a smattering of large boulders, now dried flowers poking through cracks and divots in the stone, and Ranboo scrabbles up the side of one, sets his duffle to the side and settles down. He runs hands absentmindedly over the rough surface, feels something a little too unnatural under his finger pads and glances down, sees what's probably *years* worth of graffiti carved into the speckled surface.

There's the usual *I was here* but in Apian, scratching of initials both inside and out of hearts, a few crude looking dicks that someone *really* took the time to carve in, and Ranboo wonders how many generations of Avelare youth came out here to sit where he is now, looking back over their town. It's such a small thing, could probably be contained by the square footage of Voidfall alone, and he's willing to bet the kids here despaired over that, sat up on these rocks and daydreamed about being anywhere else.

Well Ranboo's been to a lot of *anywhere else's*, and frankly, he's a little tired of it, wishes the reverse, that he had someplace like this to come back to. The Syndicate is nice, don't get him wrong, but it's not a permanent thing, whole nature of it designed to be constantly in flux, *people coming and going at all hours some days they're here next they're gone tired of that tired of spiraling through the void want stability want earth under your feet.*

Sighing heavily, Ranboo leans forwards and props his arm up on a folded leg, drops his chin into an awaiting palm, doesn't know when he stopped craving adventure. He thinks it might've been when they were falling out of the sky, when he still thought he was married and despaired over never having gotten to live a life with Tubbo like he wanted, and in those few seconds before impact, Ranboo knew instantly what kind of life he wanted.

And it was something like this, small home in a small place, where people knew you and enjoyed your company, strong sense of community and being there for one another, and it's not like Ranboo never wanted to get out and see other places, but his heart *aches* to know he has someplace to come back to, *to come home to.*

He *wants* a little house set into the hills where he can paint the door yellow, grow sunflowers out front and walk to the market barefoot and have no one bat an eye, talk to his neighbors without fear of them slipping poison into his food or a dagger into his back, someplace to hang long lines of photos up that stretch and grow along with the years.

And it's such a *stupid, naïve little dream to have*.

Ranboo rubs fingers carefully into his eyes, knows all the way down to his bones, *at his core*, that this kind of life isn't meant for him, *no rest for men like me doomed to be unmoored doomed to be alone*, and smoothing his hands out to the back of his neck, Ranboo locks his fingers together and stares ahead unseeing.

He knows he can't stay here on his own.

He's *Ender*, and the people of Avelare may be fine with him now, the infrequent and short times he's shown up, but how would they feel if he was here *permanently*? *Like a colonizer*? Just moved into their town and started adopting their customs, would they be too afraid to say anything, worried he'd go crying to the empire he'd shred with his claws if he could?

Or would they run him out of town? Band together and say enough is enough and drive him away, and they'd have every right to, but Ranboo's not sure he could handle a rejection on that scale from a place that lives so deeply in his heart, not when his heart still aches and bleeds from *care for you but not like that never like that don't want you never have-*

*Not true he feels something he cares for you in his own way*, mother argues, ever the optimist, and Ranboo shakes his head with a rueful smile, *yes but not in the way I want and what I want is something he can't give me never would've been able to give me I want the earth and he needs the stars it wasn't meant to be*.

That's the real kicker right, because even if Tubbo had loved him, had *wanted to stay*, he never would've settled for the kind of life Ranboo has come to realize he craves like you'd crave oxygen. Ranboo is a newly aware homesteader hopelessly in love with a wanderer, and that's what's been getting to him this last week or two, the understanding that he and Tubbo wouldn't have worked out anyway.

They're too different, enough of the same to make a go at it, but it was a doomed love from the start, *star-crossed cariards on opposite ends of the galaxy dual orbiting stars knocked out of alignment*, and hanging his head, Ranboo stares at the speckled surface of the boulder and wonders if it'll ever stop hurting.

*You can't have everything you want Ranboo*, and he knows okay, thinks he might've always known, and it's probably stupid and melodramatic to feel like this, but that's kinda just who Ranboo is, and he huffs out a tired laugh, honestly doesn't think he's ever really gotten anything he's wanted.

His ears flick hearing the grasses on his right crunching softly, figures someone's come for their hangout spot and he ought to move, doesn't belong here anyway. Ranboo freezes though when he sees who's heading his way, stuck in place as she stops at the foot of the boulder, one hand shading her eyes, others propped on her hips.



“Got room for one more?” Cissan asks, and there’s no indication she’s been crying in her voice, tone warm and chipper like it always is, and nodding woodenly, Ranboo scoots over, making enough space for her to land with a soft tap of bare feet.

Cissan sits down in a puddle of russet colored skirts, hands fussing them into better order, warm, multicolored hexagons scattered across the material like falling leaves, says conversationally, “You know, it’s funny I find you here, Bo used to come out here a lot to sulk too.”

“I’m not sulking.” Ranboo grumbles sulkily, and it just figures he’d find some spot that was important to Tubbo, *drawn together like magnets like the bonds that hold the universe together unbreakable ties*, claw scratching at a carved dick with a pretty good idea of who put it there.

Humming noncommittally, Cissan looks over at him, arms crossing as she playfully cocks her head to the side, “Six of one half dozen of the other, but either way, I got a bone to pick with you mister. What’s all this running off before I get the chance to say hello, hm?”

“I- uh, s-sorry.” Ranboo stammers, ducking his head with an embarrassed flush on his face, ears pinning back in shame, worried she’s upset, that he’s done something wrong and *of course you have you couldn’t protect her son broke your promise she hates you she’s always hated you imperial scum colonizer Enderian dog-*

“Ranboo, melli, I’m just teasing.” Her soft voice hushes, careful touch along his arm that grows more sure when he doesn’t pull away, fingers tugging at him gently to get his attention, “Hey now, I’m sorry, tesoro, I talk without thinking a lot, bet you wouldn’t believe that, hm? Oh Ranboo...won’t you look at me, *dulcito?*”

He does hesitantly, afraid of upsetting her more by not complying, but she smiles at him, reaches over very slowly and tucks some hanging hair behind his ear, “There’re those pretty eyes, no need to hide them, melli, they’re so lovely. I’m sorry for making you think I was upset with you. I’m not, *dulcito*, really truly, I just missed you s’all.”

“I-I missed y-you too.” Ranboo stumbles out without thinking, but there’s fingers petting through his hair and there haven’t been in so long his brain is melting a little. He’s at least aware enough not to rub his head forcefully against Cissan’s hand, can’t stop the soft, rattling coo that eases free when she scratches at his scalp though, and Cissan murmurs gently, “Is it okay if I hug you?”

Ranboo nods his head so fast and then she’s dragging him in, two pairs of arms curling across his back as he carefully tucks his under her wings. It’s like the memory of a dream, something not quite right a little off, *stop it stop it know what’s off know what you’re wanting but cut it out not fair to you not fair to her*, and he presses his cheek into her hair, biting his lip hard in the hopes it’ll stop the bubbling sobs.

“I-I was so w-worried about you.” Cissan sniffs in a tone Ranboo is very familiar with, *snatching and catching weird on the verge of tears cry just the same*, and her arms tighten, somehow drag him closer, “*Q-Queens above*, w-when I got that m-message from Technoblade a-about...a-about the *c-crash*, I- I-I o-oh *Queens I-*”

“I-I’m so s-sorry.” Ranboo wheezes, scared of squeezing her too hard, she’s so small he doesn’t want to hurt her, *didn’t want to hurt either one of them but they stand crying in each other’s arms terrified they’d lost one another*; words tumbling out fast and jumbled, “M’sorry! M’s-so s-sorry!”

“Why’re you apologizing, lovie? I-I’m a *mama*, I’m a-always going to worry.” Cissan laughs tremulously, hands patting affectionate circles around his back, but that’s not what Ranboo’s talking about, and he rocks his head, whimpering, “I-I *p-promised you*. I- I t-told you I-I’d *keep h-him safe, a-and- a-and he almost d-died! Sorry! S-So sorry!* T-Terrible p-person failed y-you f-failed *him m’sorry! M’so-!*”

A pair of her hands are gone lightning quick, resettle along the back of his head and tug him down incessantly, and Ranboo is so much taller than her, has a horn and everything, but somehow, someway, she gets him tucked under her chin. Her fingers card through his hair, coax free all the aching *wailing desperate sobs* that sit burning under his ribs, and he stops trying to pretend, hides in the crook of her neck and cries.

Cissan smells like lavender and baking bread, like colorful patchwork quilts and a dusty kind of warmth, holds him like she cares for him, *like he’s hers*, whispering furiously against his temple, “None of that now, you hear me? You haven’t *failed anyone*, you did everything you could and I’m *so proud of you*.”

Ranboo wails, huddling into Cissan and pretends he’s smaller than he is, *that he’s little and has two horns and no scars and so much hope*, gasps brokenly, “I-It was s-so *bad*, I- I-I thought h-he was- t-that *I w-was* g-going to have to- to w-watch him d-die-! I f-failed! Didn’t have his b-back c-couldn’t watch his s-six- I-I let him get h-hurt I-!”

“You did incredible, you were so smart and *so brave*.” Cissan murmurs, fire bright fingers soothing along his scalp, rubbing over his shoulders and unbiddenly, Ranboo starts to relax, great heaving cries quieting into soft whimpers as she hushes, “Y-You saved my s-son’s *life*, I...I can never thank you enough, melli. T-Thank you for what you did for him, t-thank you for g-getting him back to *me*.”

“I would’ve g-given my *life* f-for him.” Ranboo croaks out, chest still shaking a little with leftover sobs, and he means it, he really would’ve, would give anything so Tubbo is safe and happy and cared for, and Ranboo thinks it’s that mentality more than anything that shows the depths of his feelings for him.

“I know you would’ve, and I’m glad you didn’t have to.” Cissan hums, hand dropping from his hair to wrap over one of his own, lifts it gently so she can inspect the grey smattering of scars across his knuckles, how light his fingertips are now, wet exhale shuddering out, “Oh tesoro, I-I’m so sorry you were hurt like this I...i-it breaks my heart to see both my boys like-”

She cuts herself off as quickly as she can, but it wasn’t soon enough, Ranboo still *heard*, *boys my boys does she mean like no she can’t you don’t belong here don’t fit not your place not your home not your family*, moves back enough to lift his head, stares at her with trepidation in his eyes and traitorous hope burning in his chest.

Tears run down Cissan's cheeks, skin red and blotchy, and her eyebrows are curved sharply inwards, *worry* settled deep in the lines of her face, but those night dark eyes dart over him, and she huffs out a tired laugh, shakes her head with a rueful smile, "I-I never know when to shut up, do I...b-but I mean it Ranboo, *mi tesoro mi corde*, and it m-may not be my place, but...you're l-like a *son* to me-"

Two hands come up to cup his face, thumbs sweeping out under his eyes, and it's the same motion as *hands trailing over his back through his hair care for you always care for you my darling my littlest my baby*, and his heart stutters in his chest when Cissan says, "I *know* you have a mama, and I'm *not* trying to replace her. I...I just c-care for you so *much*, sweetheart, and I'm here for whatever you need, I'll *always* be here."

*Never leaving you not really always been here always will be in the stars overhead in the earth under your feet inside your own heart inside hers*, the wind whispers the cosmos sighs, and Ranboo's lower lip wobbles staring at eyes that are overflowing with *affection*, looking at him like he's *worth something, like he matters like he's cared for like he's hers*, and he crashes forwards crying, "*A-Ama! I-I- ama, a-ama!*"

It's instinctual at this point to knock their foreheads together, to try and rub his horn into the antennae that tickle around it, *know you know you different people different planets but family all the same*, and she holds him while his back jerks with sobs, runs hands through his hair and sings sweet in Apian, presses a kiss into his brow and calls him *son*.

They walk back to her house arm in arm once the tears have stopped, Ranboo escorting her like he would any lady of the court, and Cissan asks him about his work with Puffy, has a pretty good understanding of mechanical engineering given who her husband was, who her son is. Neighbors call out greetings as they pass, don't seem put off at all when Cissan introduces Ranboo as *her boy*, only thing they react surprised to the way sibilant words flow out of his mouth, all seem happily startled and impressed by his Apian.

"*You've taught him well, hardly any accent.*" A sister-in-law praises, and Ranboo shyly twists his feet together while Cissan laughs loudly, dragging him into a side hug, "*Oh I've barely done anything, he's just incredibly smart. You should hear him talk about his work, and I do mean to brag, but he's basically a genius.*"

"*C-Cissan...*" Ranboo protests weakly, a little nervous to refer to her as *ama* with others, not sure if that's okay, if she wants him to publicly claim her like that, and she chases those fears out of his head with a light swat to the hip, quipping in Apian, "*Hey, don't argue with your mom.*"

Warm *affectionate excited overwhelming* things race up from his feet to the top of his head, *mom ama hers I'm hers*, tint his cheeks and the tips of his ears a dark purple, and Ranboo vibrates practically the entire way back, doesn't know what to do with the feelings prickling under his skin like stardust.

*Is this okay are you okay with this*, Ranboo asks softly where he's unlacing his boots by the front door, Benson jumping at his feet and creating a ruckus Cissan is trying to hush because Tubbo's apparently sleeping, and mother laughs soaring from all around him, *of course of*

*course you aren't forgetting me by finding care in someone else I'm still here I always will be but now she is too and we'll care for you together.*

Any guilty insecurities he had evaporate like mist in the heat of the day, and Ranboo stands side by side with Cissan in her kitchen, follows along diligently as she talks him through the recipes she's making. He chops vegetables with his discolored fingers wrapped steady around the hilt of knife, laughs free and open, smile crinkling his eyes, and sunlight streams in through hexagon windows, paints bright shapes on the worn floorboards where Benson's dozing, and everything's *right*.

Cissan swats at him playfully, bumps their hips together and sings loud and disjointed to the old stereo crackling in the corner, and when she lightly tugs at his ponytail, smile pinching her eyes and forming dimples, it feels like this is his to have, like he could stay if he wanted.

"Your hair's gotten so *long*, hijo." Cissan hums, moving to give the stew a quick stir, releasing another wave of savory steam into the air, heavily perfumed with the pungent greens Ranboo helped chop earlier and baskets full of fresh mushrooms. He pauses his own mixing of the sweet cheese filling for the cake, fingers a little sticky from orange juice and honey so he uses the back of his hand to push the bangs out of his eyes, sighs lightly, "*I know*, it's kinda annoying...I'm thinking about cutting it."

"*M'no*." The sleepy protest is mumbled vehemently from the door to the kitchen, and Ranboo whips his head to the side fast, heart stupidly in his throat and doing double time seeing Tubbo standing there, balled up fist rubbing into an eye while he yawns, hair a thousand different directions, "S'looks good..."

"*You*." Cissan barks, rounding on him with her wooden spoon brandished like a firearm, playful light twinkling in her eyes, "Remember what I said last time? About those scissors? What happened about that, huh? You look like a *shrub*."

Tubbo shuffles further into the kitchen and pulls out a chair with a scrape, flops down into it sighing, "You do hear yourself, right? Like...s'comical at this point, *the hypocrisy*. Get on to *me* for *my hair*, but then tell'im *he* looks *handsome*."

"Ranboo has high cheekbones, longer hair suits him." Cissan declares with an air of finality, turns back to her soup and it's pleasantly quiet for a second, and then with a light rap against the side of the pot, she says a little *too* casually, "Oh...also? I never said he was handsome, even though he is."

Electricity crackles up his spine, and Ranboo makes the mistake of looking at Tubbo, finds him staring back, face starting to go bright red and his own bleeds dark purple at the sight. He spins on his heel, returns to mixing the cake together with shaking hands now, pulse a frantic drumbeat under his skin, mind kicked back and forth between, *doesn't want you care for you but not like that nothing permanent* and *kinda like you wanted to hold your hand looks good looks handsome*.

*He doesn't feel the same he doesn't want what you want*, Ranboo reminds himself, being careful to spoon out the same sized amount of cheese filling into the cake pan, and it's a good distraction, ends up making something slightly reminiscent of flower petals resting in the

batter. With the cake and the stew done, Cissan shoos them out of the kitchen and gently reminds them that the rest of the family is going to be by later, tells them to enjoy their day until then.

Only problem with that being that Ranboo has no idea what to do with Tubbo anymore, so for lack of a better idea, they end up back in his room and sit on the floor playing ancient video games. They're not really that old, belonged to Tubbo's father when he was younger, but Ranboo's only frame of reference is the sleek console and crisp graphics of the system Monto had at his nameday party.

The blocky designs are somehow more endearing Ranboo finds, spends a good amount of time admiring them rather than trying to win, clear from the start Tubbo has played these *a lot* and it's not really a contest. He takes the silly little racing game about as seriously as flying the Eshachi, eyes fixed determinedly forwards, wings flickering behind him excitedly and there's no winning *against that*.

Tubbo may have gotten shot down, but he's still the best pilot Ranboo's ever seen, and he knows that if the Eshachi had the same kind of power, same unstoppable heart beating at her core, the two of them would've won easily. It's thoughts like these that make Ranboo bemoan being cut off from the royal coffers, and he was too nervous when he first ran away that he didn't try it, but now, he's really wishing he'd forked over the small grand it'd take to get Tubbo End crystal reactors.

And what a *thought* that is, their ship's turbines glowing bright teal, burning through the galaxy faster than anyone else could fly, and Ranboo hums dreamily, completely stalling in the racing game and Tubbo blows past him a few times, eventually questioning, "Hey, you good man?"

"Yeah just...thinking about the Eshachi with End crystal reactors." Ranboo sighs wistfully, doesn't think anything of it until Tubbo bursts out into laughter, glares over at him indignantly, whatever quip he was about to make dying on his tongue seeing the way Tubbo smiles at him, shaking his head fondly, "Queens, *sorry!* It's just...you sound just like *me*."

"Well you're clearly a terrible influence." Ranboo mutters, breaking eye contact because he can't handle the way Tubbo looks in the afternoon light, eyes all scrunched up, staring so fondly at Ranboo, it almost looks like he lo-

*Nope nope not going there we are not doing that again*, but the memories are suddenly *everywhere*, and all Ranboo can see, *can hear*, is being in this room *months ago*, when he watched morning light halo Tubbo's head while he told him he loved him, *never thought you'd hear those words have someone look at you like that never thought this would be yours to have-*

*And it's not it never was*, Ranboo has to cruelly remind himself, turns his attention back to the racing game and drags up other memories instead, *pale face eyes blown wide in terror not like that don't like you like that not husbands not carriads don't love you don't want you unless it's temporary until I change my mind*, and the next few races Ranboo wipes the floor with Tubbo to his immense displeasure.

“It’s my *birthday*, you’re supposed to be *nice to me*.” Tubbo grumbles, not paying attention as he flicks through the games on the console and Ranboo’s ears flatten, really has to fight the urge not to snip, *you can’t have everything you want Tubbo*.

Thankfully they’re not alone for too much longer, people start showing up late afternoon once they get off work, and the entire house is soon filled with waving arms and laughing dark eyes, mischievous grins and children darting around underfoot. Ranboo’s not surprised to learn Heli is a cousin, daughter of one of Tubbo’s uncles, and the little girl is ecstatic to see him, launches herself at Ranboo and starts on about his blaster, which he, *again*, left on the ship for obvious reasons.

There are some other kids he remembers from the summer, *Lalus Marini Torrus*, and they all greet him excitedly in standard, crowd close and want to know about missions, look inquisitively at his hands and ask what happened in that honest, but insensitive way children have. Ranboo’s not really sure what to tell them, what their parents would be okay with them knowing, settles for the simple truth of he got hurt trying to help Tubbo.

If possible, this makes all the children hang off him more, trail along after his heels like pesky little endermitees, and there’s a few new faces he doesn’t recognize, but they all introduce themselves loudly, only dropping their voices to whisper and giggle in their native language amongst each other, like they think he can’t hear them.

And despite all of Cissan’s bragging, Ranboo is still very much a beginner speaker when it comes to Apian, but he’s got the basics, and double takes hearing what he thinks the kids are referring to him as.

“*Wha- queen? Why am I a queen?*” Ranboo sputters in Apian, not sure he overheard them correctly, but the children all shriek delightedly, and in between their high pitched, giggling voices, Ranboo finally gets some pieced together explanation that he’s Queen because *he’s tall*. Before he can even question *that*, he gets drug into a game of hide-and-go-seek tag, races barefoot through the grass fields over the top of Cissan’s house, breathless and wild as he swipes at the ankles soaring above him.

Ranboo could honestly catch them if he was really trying, but that would just end in stuck out lips and temper tantrums, so he plays along with the idea that they somehow have the upper hand, lets himself get tackled to the earth a few times by overexcited kids divebombing him.

It really doesn’t hurt to have Heli crash into him where she was zipping by overhead, but Ranboo collapses to the ground and rolls them both around, ends with her sitting on his chest cackling as he fakes a very dramatic, and gruesome, death. “*Death to the Queen!*” Heli crows like the little goblin she is, beating her fists into his chest for good measure, giggling like crazy when Ranboo sticks his tongue out with each hit, and another cousin pipes up quickly, “*Heli watch it, that’s regicide-*”

“*Your mom’s regicide!*” A boy shouts from somewhere overhead and Ranboo can’t help breaking character, laughing loudly at the idiocy of young children. This spurs all of them into a joke telling battle, has Ranboo wheezing he’s laughing so hard at their ridiculous attempts at humor, head tipped back in the warm autumn light, contentment and peace and *belonging* singing under his skin like spinning turbines.

A shout carries up over the hill, one of the aunts calling for them to come in and washup, that dinner's almost ready, and the children scramble off in a mad dash, Heli launching herself off Ranboo's chest with a snap of her wings, punching all the air from his lungs. He's struggling to sit up his abdomen hurts so bad, in part from all the involuntary laughing and also from Heli using him like a springboard, when there's a scarred set of hands in his face, soft voice asking, "Need a hand? Maybe...even two?"

"F-Funny. You're...*funny*." Ranboo wheezes, taking Tubbo's hands and lets himself be hauled up, goes to drop them and finds he can't, pale fingers curling around his own, and his heart stutters out of time. Looking up at Tubbo is a mistake, *it's always a mistake*, and he's so lovely in the setting sun, flashing spark in his navy eyes that makes them glow a deep blue, but his expression is *conflicted*, confused and scared and *lost*.

It's like he's desperately hoping Ranboo's going to have the answer he needs to a question he can't figure out, one he isn't able to find for himself, but what is Ranboo supposed to do for him, *he doesn't know either*, has been fumbling and failing just as badly, lost on who they are, what they even are to each other anymore.

"We can't do this." Is what Ranboo says, but what he means, what gets caught up in his throat is *don't do this to me you know I want to be yours and I know you don't want to be mine please don't do this to me*, but Tubbo just wets his lips, fingers flexing gently over his wrist, "Ranboo...I-"

"Let go." Ranboo urges soft but firm, *let go move on I'm trying to why aren't you*, and Tubbo does, but his hands are slow moving off Ranboo's skin, fingers hesitating like they don't want to say goodbye, and Ranboo shudders as the last few slip away. He leaves Tubbo standing up there, heads back inside and gets bombarded with a dozen too loud voices and delicious smells, tries to be normal tries to be social, but it's like he's not actually down here, it's like he's still *up there*, standing on a small hill in the fading sun wondering when things got so complicated.

Dinner is a blur, Ranboo eats and doesn't taste anything, has no idea what he's saying in response to questions, might be speaking Enderian for all he knows, but he can't stop thinking about the way Tubbo looked at him, *how he said his name*, a desperate plea a fruitless prayer. *What is he doing what am I doing*, Ranboo drags his spoon through the dregs of his broth, doesn't want to be but is listening intently for any snatch of Tubbo's voice, *is he messing with me no he'd never just doesn't know what he wants but he said sounded so sure never wanted this-*

Ranboo's ears flick when he hears that bubbling laughter, peeks up and finds Tubbo further down the table, grinning at something one of his cousins is saying, all of her hands waving around while she talks and he laughs again, eyes scrunching closed dimples in his cheeks, *hi sunshine*. With a sigh, Ranboo pushes back from the table and goes to drop his bowl in the sink, edges out of the kitchen and towards the front door, feels like he needs some fresh air.

The temperature has dropped steadily after the sun set, and it's still not actually cold for Ranboo, but he can recognize it's chilly, pulls the edges of his bomber closer as he leans against the garden fence. Out here, so far away from any big cities, there's no light pollution

to dilute the night sky, and the stars *blaze* overhead, fuzzy glowing band of one of Andromeda's arms arcing across the sky like a smile.

"Hi mama." Ranboo whispers, head tipped back and eyes raking reverently over the cosmos, last stray wisps of wind batting at his hair gently, *fingers tugging at his ear tweaking his nose hi darling*, and he sighs, lacing his fingers together, "How are you? Hope you're doing well...I-I don't know if *I am*. I...I'm *so confused*, I-I feel *so lost*."

*Tell me I'm here I'll listen let it go set it free let the night take it away from you*, the stars thrum the earth under his feet hushes, and Ranboo bows his head, stares out over a dark, sleepy town with glowing orange lights that sputter happily in windows, "I don't know what to do about, Tubbo...it seems like everything I do pushes us further apart, and I-I'm *scared*. I don't know h-how to stop it."

There's no bugs singing in the night, just the muffled sound of too many voices calling excitedly at his back, his own words gentle and quiet, easing out to the stars like the first tentative steps of a new dance, "I'm worried if things keep going like they're going...that we're not even going to be *friends* a-anymore-"

*Promised he'd always be there that you'd always be friends trust him why don't you trust him*, mother asks, cold hand finding his shoulder as the sounds of the party spike and then quiet in a short burst, and blowing out a huge breath, Ranboo tips their heads together, "It's not that I *don't* trust him, it's just...I think he's confused right now and I'm...i-it's been really hard."

The phantom sensation of fingers threaded through his, circling his wrist, *lost look in his eyes don't go please stay*, makes Ranboo shudder, corrosive pain bubbling to life under his bones, and he knows he can't keep doing this forever. "I-I don't know what *he wants*." Ranboo exhales sharply, fingers flexing against one another, thumbs rubbing across his own knuckles, *fire bright pair in his instead love you stelle don't care for you like that don't want to be married don't love you*, and he shakes his head, "B-But I *know* it's not what I-I want."

*How do you know you haven't asked said he liked you could grow to love you in his own way*, mother tries to argue, and she's always been the brightest point in Ranboo's mind, *his largest and most beautiful guiding light*, but she's also the source of all his hopeless delusions.

"You *know* that's not how it works." Ranboo snorts, raising his head back up so his eyes can trace over the heavens, thinks he likes the look of the stars better from down here, where he can flex his toes into the earth, "I love him because I'm *me*, because he's *him*, I...I was just always supposed to love him...but he was never going to love *m-me*."

Ranboo's voice catches weird and he laughs a little wetly, gentle ache around his lungs from a few pathetic sobs, but he won't let them free, flexes his arms out in front of him and takes a deep breath, "That's okay though, we're too different, w-want different things, and t-that's okay. I want to stay h-he wants to go, I-I want something *permanent*, he...h-he *doesn't*, and i-it's better to *know now* i-instead of later, because now...because n-now-"

Because now Ranboo doesn't have to get too attached, *more than he already is can you be more fixed than molecular bonds holding something together very fabric of reality urging you*



*to close the gap complete the loop reach out take his hand finish the equation refit those two halves together*, and whispering it out like it's the greatest crime to admit, Ranboo says, "Because now might be a good time to...go our separate ways."

And the world is silent, stars seeming to dim with his admission and Ranboo knows then without a shadow of doubt that he doesn't mean it, *that it was a mistake to say*, but before he can refute it, there's a hushed voice crying, "I-I don't *want to*."

Ranboo jerks upright, spins around, feels something like déjà vu seeing Tubbo standing behind him, stricken look on his face, but instead of all consuming panic that swallows him whole, it's more of a quiet dread, because this just figures. *He's gotten bad about eavesdropping*, Ranboo thinks with a sigh, tries to roll out some of the tenseness that just crept into his shoulders.

He's not sure how much Tubbo overhead, *doesn't really matter he knew most of it anyway*, but that last bit was less than ideal, probably has him worrying about partner transfer request forms and guilty grey wings that droop towards the floor, *not you nothing personal sorry I can't*, and Ranboo goes to reassure him, "Sorry, I misspoke, I don't wanna change partners or anything, don't worry I'm just-"

"T-That's not what I meant." Tubbo stammers, takes a step forwards and then stops, halfway off his mother's front porch as he stares imploringly at Ranboo, "I...c-can we talk?"

It's such a simple request but nothing has ever made Ranboo's heart pound so erratically so quickly, *there's so much behind it*, feels like he's going to shake apart at the seams, sick of anxiety swirling to life and *it sounds like skeletons sniggering in the night no all of you shut up slams the doors on their sunken faces calm down focus get it together*.

"I'm...not sure that's a good idea." Ranboo hedges slowly, proud with the way his voice doesn't shake, but Tubbo deflates immediately, lower hands stuffed in the pockets of his bomber, upper set dropping weakly to his sides, "I- y-yeah...yeah okay. I um...I-I get that I just-*fuck*. Y-Yeah okay...o-okay..."

The defeated tone to his voice sets *that* door rattling like it's possessed, and Ranboo aims a sharp glare at it, *remember what he said what he told you don't feel that way doesn't want to be married get a grip*, but then easing out through some gap like a traitorous little breath of fresh air is *felt like that then but things change-*

*Not for me*, Ranboo snaps back at the memory automatically, but it curls a little closer, over his hands up his arms, settles deep in his chest like the way nebula expand out into protostars, like how planets come into existence, and it whispers right along the core of his being *didn't they though didn't things change haven't you?*

Ranboo can't breathe for a minute, can't find the words to argue because he doesn't have them, helpless to stop that feeling worming deeper, and it does with *glee*, melds into his bones like starlight, like auroras burning in the sky overhead, *change isn't always bad change isn't always permanent unbreakable bonds but they still flex they still move with the flow of life it's about balance its about finding your place in the stars*.

*You don't know what you're talking about it's not like that its...it doesn't work like that,* Ranboo feebly tries to protest, but the thing isn't listening, too busy humming through his veins like turbines spinning at warp, like the otherworldly thrum and song of stars as they radiate through the endless night, *the universe is constantly in flux there is no one answer there is no clear path it's beautiful it's chaos its life and there's no right way to live it.*

*But what if I'm wrong what if I get hurt I...I'm scared,* Ranboo whispers, curling closer to the thing that smiles at him brilliantly, skin alight like the most livid of nebula, binary sun eyes and stardust dripping down from long ears, lone horn sweeping out of trailing hair that curls and snaps like a comet's tail. It laughs joyously, nothing cruel in it, just delighted pleasure at being alive, drifts closer and cups his face in hands of starlight, *that's okay it's okay to be scared life's hard but you don't have to face it alone and if it's any consolation...he's scared too.*

That drops him back to reality, *to himself away from himself,* and Ranboo hesitantly meets Tubbo's eyes, startled to see the same fears and worries that he feels racing through his veins mirrored in those night dark eyes. His heart jumps painfully, *we're the same we're the same in this terrified over losing one another over drifting too far unmoored lost forever in the void,* and swallowing hard, Ranboo takes a shaky step forwards, *but if you just reached out if you took each other's hands you'd have something to tether to wouldn't have to be lost alone,* murmurs haltingly, "Y-Yeah okay...I-let's talk."

They meander out into the autumn night, side by side and not quite lightyears apart anymore, Tubbo leading the way towards where Ranboo has a pretty good idea they're going, isn't surprised at all to find himself back at the clustering of boulders. It's different sitting up here at night, darkness swallowing everything but the bright smattering of wavering lights from the windows in Avelare, nothing but the blazing starfields of *eternity* stretching wide overhead.

Tubbo sits hunched over with his hands clasped around his raised knees, head tipped back to stare at the cosmos with so much naked adoration, it's staggering, "I've been...thinking a lot, these past few weeks and I...just wanted to talk to you about what- w-what I'm f-feeling."

"I...o-okay." Ranboo whispers and even he can tell it sounds broken, *scared and afraid doesn't want to get his hopes up can't do this again can't listen to how he's not loved,* and Tubbo sighs, shuffling into himself further, chin propped up on his folded arms, "I didn't understand when you said...w-when you said you were m-made to *love me I- I-I* didn't get h-how *love* w-was different for you than for me, I didn't understand what being *cariads* meant."

*Cariads* rolls off his tongue like he's been saying it for years, *no hesitation no fumbling like he's practiced the shape of it,* and Ranboo feels like he's been spun off through the air wondering if he has, scrambling to collect his bearings as Tubbo keeps going, "But I think I understand a little better I...b-being *cariads* is- i-is like being soulmates, right? B-But it's different, it's not the same for everyone?"

"Y-Yeah, no two people love the same way, not everyone c-cares for one another similarly, but that's what makes a *cariad* so special." Ranboo hushes softly, the thing of starlight coiling happily under his skin, wound up tight through his ribs, and spreading a hand out against his chest, Ranboo hears it whisper *I love you* back through the beating of his heart, "A *cariad* is

supposed to be the being that knows you better than anyone, your other half, they're...t-they're supposed to love you in all the ways you *want* to be loved."

Hand drifting up to fiddle with the long strands of his hair, Ranboo huffs and coils it quick around his fingers while he fidgets, "It's not perfect, it's still *work*, but it's just...knowing all the way at your core that this is the person for you, that they're able to love you more wholly than anyone else can. A-And being in a relationship with them is the *promise* to keep trying to make it work, to *keep* loving each other like no one else can."

"And you...feel like that about me?"

"Yes, s-sorry if that um, m-makes you uncomfortable." Ranboo sighs, looks up at the stars now too, at the infinity he was always chasing after the freedom he wanted to win for himself, spreads a hand out over the rock under him and thinks he's found happiness where he is now, "I just...no one's ever cared for me like you have, you make me feel s-seen, *heard*, i-important. I wanted to become a better person because of you, to keep growing. You *inspire* me, you...you helped me realize life w-was *worth* living."

There's a sharp inhale next to him, and Ranboo shakes his head, *too much you're always too much*, smiles ruefully at where a comet darts past overhead, bright flash of it's tail streaking through the night like a glittering tear of the universe, *like the vivid glow of engines powering up to warp time to leave this behind you*, "Sorry, that was probably a little much, a-and you don't need to worry. I'm not going to pressure you into anything, I-I know you don't feel the same I-"

"You're wrong." Those two words stop Ranboo dead in his tracks, *engines stalling out warp core malfunctioning*, feels like the universe quits turning, like everything is at a standstill and he should be drifting off into space without gravity to yank him back down, and slowly, *terrified*, Ranboo wrenches his eyes away from the heavens, "I- *w-what?*"

"You're wrong." Tubbo repeats thickly, already looking back at Ranboo and the breath stalls in his lungs because it's like looking at the cosmos, *endless infinity in his eyes the universe looking back at you the one that knows you the one that loves you*, "I...I've never felt like this for another person I- I don't think I ever will again. I didn't understand you earlier...w-when you told me loving me was a part of your *being*, but I get it now."

*There's no way it's not possible he said he'd never that he didn't want but things change life spins on there's always a chance you just have to be willing to put in the effort you just have to be willing to try-*

"It's like space." Tubbo hushes, and the stars in his eyes *throb* and *dance* and reach out for Ranboo with glowing hands, *come with us come fly with us know your place know where you belong and it's right here it's right here with him*, "I love the stars *so deeply*, I-I feel it in my *bones*, that this is where I belong, that this is where I was meant to be, w-what I was *meant* for, a-and I didn't know I could feel that for *a person*...but when I look at you, Ranboo? A-All I see is *the universe*."

"W-What are you s-saying?" Ranboo stammers, vision wobbling with how hard his heart is beating, thundering away in his chest like the explosive rumble of ship engines kicking on,

*not possible not possible fabricating making it all up insan-* and scooting to face him fully, Tubbo sticks his lower right hand in a pocket, “W-What I’m saying is this-”

And then in horribly accented but perfectly understandable Enderian, Tubbo asks, “*You’re the only one for me, I love you in the way no one else has, and I...a-and I ask if you could love me like that too?*”

He then draws his hand out and shining in the starlight, quivering in the palm of his shaking hand, is a cariad bead.

*I’ve gone insane*, is the first thing on Ranboo’s mind, but reality doesn’t pulse and strobe like a hallucination, *this is real this- this is REAL*, so his next thought is, *he’s gone insane*, but Tubbo sounds nothing but reasonable when he sniffs around a tremulous smile, “S-Sorry it took me so long, stelle, I-I always did have a thick head-”

“A-Are you ser-? I-! I-I don’t t-think you uh, k-know what you’re *a-asking for*.” Ranboo stumbles in a panic, so sure he must’ve gotten something lost in translation, unclear what he’s asking *doesn’t know what he’s promising*, and still not drawing his hand back, Tubbo says even and clear, “I’m asking you if you’ll let me stand by your side for eternity, I’m asking you if you’ll let me love you like you want to be loved, I...I’m asking you *to marry me*.”

There’s no arguing against that, *there’s no arguing against that holy shit there’s no arguing against that*, Ranboo is very lightheaded all of a sudden, has to throw an arm back to keep himself upright, uses the other to push the hair out of his eyes, staring unbelieving at Tubbo sitting across from him with a *cariad bead in his hand*, “I...y-you want to m-marry me?”

“Yes.” Tubbo’s so quick to say it, Ranboo isn’t sure he’s hearing him correctly, *lost in translation thousands of lightyears apart but no not really only a few feet so easy to bridge that gap just stretch your hand out*, repeats again incredulously, “Y-You wanna marry me?”

“Yes, i-if you want me to.” Tubbo stutters a little shy, dipping his head to the side before looking back up, antennae flicking nervously, “I-I don’t know how e-else to describe it I just...I really think- *no*, n-no, *I k-know* you’re the only one for me, there’s never going to be a-anyone else...y-your my cariad, Ranboo.”

Ranboo’s never seen a star form, but he imagines it’s something like this, energy races up through his whole body makes all his hair stand on end, burns through his veins sets everything alight in an all consuming wave of *joy*, and the thing inside him, *the thing that is him the star at his core the one that loves him so wholly*, laughs loud and soaring and *jubilant*.

“B-But you- I- you *don’t*” He’s rambling incoherently, mind not caught up to what his heart has already decided, forever lagging with weighted suspicions and paranoia, *waiting for the other shoe to drop*, “I just- we’re not- w-we don’t *work*, y-you want to go, I-I wanna *stay*. I-I w-want a house, *a-a home*, I want to s-stay *here*, b-but you- y-you want adventure, *f-freedom*, you don’t want-!”

“I’m tired, Ranboo.” Tubbo sighs, *sounds like he means it dark circles under his eyes muscles so tense all the time needs a break needs pictures on the wall a place to come back to that’s*

*his that's theirs*, shoulders dropping a bit like he's carrying something insurmountably heavy, "I'm tired of running, o-of getting shot at, w-worrying about if I'll get to live another day with you or not."

Scratching a hand through his hair, Tubbo pushes his truly unruly bangs out of his eyes, and it's dark, it's hard to be certain, but Ranboo gets the feeling that fire that's always burning in him has waned a little, not dimmed, not extinguished, *just settled*, "Look, I'm never going to stop flying, I can't ignore who I am, and I know you can't either. You love the stars just as much as I do, but...I think I finally realized how much I've missed the earth, b-being grounded is nice sometimes, y-ya'know?"

*Pleasant feeling weighing you down pinning you here grounding you in this moment keeping you here he understands he feels it to he...he wants to stay*, and Ranboo swallows rough, hands drifting to settle in his lap, stares at the way Tubbo's arm has started to shake, but he refuses to drop it, palm still held out in offering as he hushes, "It's hard right now, for m-me to stay in one place, b-but I *want to*, I...I want to give you t-that life you want."

*Sailing through the stars back here back to your home the one he wants to give you the one he wants to build together*

"But I *promise*, as soon as my warrants are dropped, w-we can come back here, *permanently*."

*Forever he means forever he's talking about a future with you he's talking about an eternity with you he wants to stay oh Ancients he wants to stay*

"W-We can pick a spot and I-I'll build you that house, make sure the ceilings are tall enough for you and everything, put lots of windows in, w-whatever you want."

*Little house set into the hill sunflowers out front walking to the market barefoot hand in hand braids in your hair beads catching in the light I love you being what it's supposed to be I love you being forever*; and with a great rattling thud, those chains start dropping away over the door that leaks sunlight. For once, it doesn't ease open on it's own, patiently waiting for Ranboo to reach out, to twist the handle and let it all free finally.

He's still scared, still worried about if they're understanding one another, *but they are and it's okay don't have to do it alone he's scared too but he laid it all on the line for you and this is a partnership isn't it*, and taking a deep breath, Ranboo wraps his hand around that handle and whispers ragged, "C-Can we paint the f-front door yellow?"

And because it's *Ranboo*, there's a dozen more questions threaded through that one that go unsaid, *are you sure do you know what you're promising is this what you want*, and because Tubbo is *Tubbo*, he seems to hear them all anyway, face going incredibly tender as he murmurs, "Of course, stelledore."

Ranboo launches himself forwards without another thought, hits Tubbo with perhaps a bit too much force and they almost go tumbling off the boulder, but gossamer wings buzz furiously and keep them upright. Tucking his head into the crook of Tubbo's neck, Ranboo stammers out *I love you's* with the full elation of knowing they both *understand now*, and finally,

*achingly*, there's arms around him again, fire bright hands spread out across his back, like sunlight slanting warm and beautiful over his face, but this time, they're not going away.

It's entirely familiar and entirely alien to be sitting back to front again, Ranboo crying and laughing in equal measures like one of the theatrical, weepy protags from his books. He actually recites the words aloud this time as Tubbo braids his hair, and nothing has brought him to tears quite like hearing Tubbo repeating after him, sounding like the most lovely of echoes.

"Let this braid be a symbol of my commitment to you," Tubbo parrots, weaving strands of hair together in a pattern he can do even in the dark of the night, *because he knows it so well*, "like how my love for you is threaded throughout my entire being," one set of hands working on the braid the other tracing gentle shapes over his arms, *I'm here you're here not going anywhere*, "like how our lives will be woven together," little tugging pull as the bead is slipped over the end of the braid, *locking it in place I'm yours and you're mine*, "I am forever yours no matter what comes, to you, I promise this."

Tubbo made him a bead, spent time down in the repair bay when Ranboo wasn't there agonizing over what he was doing, terrified he'd already wrecked everything and paranoid he'd just ruin it further, that Ranboo would step back, step away and say *sorry it's too broken it's too damaged can't fix this one have to move on*. He was going to ask earlier, on the hill, but Ranboo had asked him to let go instead and Tubbo had stood there terrified because he didn't think he could, fingers clutching at the bead that now rests in Ranboo's hair.

"I-It's nothing fancy." Tubbo murmured embarrassed as Ranboo turned the little piece of metal around in the moonlight, eyes easily picking out all the carved details, *tiny diamond shaped stars and geometric bees parts of me and parts of him us it's us*, rippling pattern in the metal itself he's never seen anywhere else, "It's plastisteel, u-um, i-it's p-part of the Eshachi actually, I um...I-I don't know, it s-seemed like a uh, I-like a good idea at the time-"

"No, no it's perfect, *really*. I adore it." Ranboo soothed, curled his fingers around the bead and pressed it briefly against his chest, *your cariad your ship everything you hold so close to your heart*, before passing it back, can't stop the wide smile that draws across his face when he feels that familiar weight drag on his hair again, so *incredibly* glad he never ended up cutting it.

*And now you'll never have to*, he thinks happily, shifting because it's Tubbo's turn, and he pulls out his bead, *he kept it the one Ranboo made for him what feels like years ago he actually kept it cares for you loves you so much*, drops it carefully into Ranboo's waiting palm and smiles at him. Ranboo takes extra care to do the braid properly as he whispers his own promises into the night, finds it's significantly easier this time, Tubbo's hair a lot longer than he's ever seen it.

"Well, *yeah*." Tubbo snickers quietly when Ranboo mentions it, twists to face him once he's done, bead winking in the light of the stars, *your bead your bead on his braid your one your only your cariad your husband for real this time*, and there's a sun burning brilliantly in his smile, eyes reflecting the night sky overhead, *your future your eternity and you're his*, love catching on every word as he says, "I was growing it out so it'd be easier to braid."

**Lesson Sixty-Nine heh: Uuuh you're ugh you can't remember blah blah shut up you think no, you are happy**

He is very dizzy. He is *very dizzy* and the ground is not, so Ranboo flops down, or, he tries to, but his legs are a little confused on how to um, *how to do that exactly*, so he kinda falls on his ass. It doesn't hurt or anything, it hurts worse when Dream slings him across the room like a giant frisbee, and Ranboo starts laughing so hard imagining himself zipping through the air like a plastic disk, he tips back entirely.

The grass is cool and sweet and he rolls over to press his face into it, humming contently as the silky strands tickle at his face, warm, *rich* smell of earth stuck in his nose and he's absentmindedly rubbing his cheek across it when something tumbles down next to him. "Did'ya mean to sit down?" The arms asks him, and *woah*, Ranboo didn't know arms could talk, what an exceptional arm this is, but then something like sense trickles back into his heavy, warm mind and he remembers that arms are usually *attached* to things with mouths.

His eyes laboriously drag up the arm, skirt over shoulders and the tip of a stubborn chin, finally find a face smiling down at him, *night darks eyes dimples in his cheeks hiya sunshine*, and Ranboo grins like an idiot, drawling out long and messy, "Maaaaybeee, I dunnooooo."

"Oki, I think tha's enough wine for you *mister*." Sunshine tells him, trying to be stern but he's giggling a little and that just makes *Ranboo* giggle, doesn't know what's so funny but he turns to hide his face in the sweet soft grass and mumbles contently, "S'okay, m'kinda tired an'way."

"Wha-! Nooo, Boo! Wake uuuuup!" Sunshine protests loudly, but Ranboo just pretends to sleep, makes fake snoring noises until there's hands pushing and slapping at him, is completely unhelpful as he's rolled onto his back. Ranboo has half a thought of keeping his masterful charade up, but then his eyes drift to the sky overhead and he completely forgets about anything besides the *universe blazing above him*.

"*Woah...*" He breathes, body going pliant and lax like whenever you see something so awe inspiring and humbling, it reminds you of how small you are in face of everything else. It's not a bad feeling, doesn't make Ranboo feel sad about himself, it's just like seeing the trailing arm of a galaxy for the first time, watching nebula clouds drift apart and billow together again out in deep space, a gentle reminder that life is greater than any of them could possibly know.

"Beautiful, innit?" Sunshine sighs quietly, laying back as well, one set of arms tucked behind his head, the other clasped together over his abdomen, "I used to come out here an' lay like this all the time in the summer, just...*dreamin'*."

"Bout what?" Ranboo asks equally subdued, lightheaded to the point that he feels like he might be floating a little, sticks a hand out and tries to see if he can catch some of the stars in the palm of his hand.

“Lotta things. Flyin’ mostly, traveling the stars, finding...f-finding someone to go with me.” Sunshine hushes, words drifting out to hang lazy and hazy in between them, close enough to touch, to reach out and bridge that gap, just like the space between their chairs. Ranboo wonders if he’d have an easier time catching them than the universe above him, so far away despite how weightless he feels, fingers swiping through nothing but empty air in their attempt to touch the stars.

“I went with you...d’go with’ya anywhere.” Ranboo mumbles, letting his arm fall back to the earth with a thud, resting relaxed in between where they’re barely sitting apart, and with a breathy chuckle, Sunshine hums, “Yeah...yeah you did, it’s funny...guess I’ve been dreaming of you m’whole life, huh?”

Ranboo’s remembering sitting up on the roof of his dorm then, gazing up at the night sky that was dulled by the amount of lights in Mahari but thinking it beautiful nonetheless, all huddled into himself wishing for things he didn’t think he was allowed to want, at least until there was a hand held out for him, *entire galaxy in his smile deep dark of space opening before you like a precious gift come with me-*

“I think...I think I was dreamin’ of you too.” Ranboo says slow and syrupy thick, claws digging into the ground a little, enjoys the way the earth feels under the pads of his fingers, the sounds of bugs singing giddily in the night, low rumbling echo that starts up in his own chest, like ship engines kicking on.

And overhead, the stars dip and sway, dance around one another like figures in a cobblestone courtyard, hands locked and caught together, keeping each other in orbit, *keeping each other steady*, and Ranboo is so overwhelmingly happy, has never felt more right in his skin with his bones, *with himself*, blows out a content gust of air and likes to think flecks of shining stars go with it.

“M’ey...sunshine?” Ranboo exhales gently, sends all the bright points in the sky skittering away from him, feels like he’s walking on air on water *on the inky abyss*, the universe arching over him and spiraling past, galaxies in its skin and stars shuddering to life at its core, and there’s nothing but breathless devotion in his chest seeing the way the cosmos envelopes him like a hug, “I love you.”

“M’love you too.” The stars sing the nebula’s murmurs, the void itself washing over his feet past his knees, rocking him like he’s a child again, *like he’s her child again auroras burning in the sky overhead comets streaking past hi mama*, and when a hand finds his, touches at him with fingers that burn and *rejoice* like the hottest of star cores, Ranboo thinks the universe isn’t that far out of reach after all.

**Love is a beautiful thing the stars are a beautiful thing life is a beautiful thing**

—

Coming awake almost feels like a dream, he’s so wonderfully warm and heavy, Ranboo’s not sure he’s ever going to be moving again, huffs out a contented breath that deepens into a delighted hum feeling something drag through his hair. It’s fingers, there’s fingers in his hair, detangling it gently and scratching lightly around the base of his horns, a slow, even heartbeat



right under his ear, arms around his waist holding him close, *lavender and machine oil*, and Ranboo mumbles sleepily, “Mmm’dreamin’...”

“Nope.” A subdued but cheery voice says, popping that p with emphasis, scratches behind his ear and that really sets Ranboo off purring, twisting his head to follow the contact, can hear the words rumbling through the chest under him, “Wanna try again?”

“Hmm, ‘lucination?’” Ranboo suggests, barely awake, almost asleep again with the hand petting through his hair, smiles mushily when the surface he’s lying on bounces with breathy laughter, “Wrong again, you’re O for two, Boo, only get one more shot.”

Stretching languidly, and making a high pitched noise to accompany it, Ranboo shifts back enough so he can actually see something besides colorful fabric and a pale grey t-shirt, looks up and asks whisper-soft, “You’re...real then?”

“Very.” Tubbo says with a sleepy smile, hair all rumpled and sticking out like he’s just shocked himself, sweet set to his face, and his last free hand comes up, cups Ranboo’s cheek gently and thumbs under his eye, “Mornin’ husband.”

Automatically, the tuft on the end of Ranboo’s tail fluffs out, startled happy trill rolling out of his mouth, and he knows there’s probably a dark cast over his cheeks, the tips of his ears, but wow, it really sure is something hearing Tubbo say that. “I-I um, y-yeah h-hi, I- *uh*, g-good morning to- *u-um*, to you too h-husband.” Ranboo stammers out bashfully, and Tubbo just laughs loudly, “Oh that’s hilarious. You can tell me like, ‘*oh I see all the stars in your eyes you mean more than the galaxy to me*’ straight faced, but calling me *husband* gets you all stuttery, that’s amazing.”

“S-Shut up! I do not *like you*.” Ranboo stresses overly haughty, attempts to glare down his nose at where Tubbo is still snickering, doesn’t think he manages very well, especially not when a hand wraps around his braid, can feel his expression soften into something no less than *adoring*.

“Mmm, gonna call bullshit on that one, stelle.” Tubbo hums and gives his braid a light tug, fingers drifting down to fiddle with the bead on the end, eyes tracing gentle shapes over it, and the look on his face is going to live in Ranboo’s head for the rest of his life, “Ya’know...I didn’t realize how much I missed seeing your hair like this.”

Oh what a horrible thing to say, what a *stupid horrible absolutely lovely thing to say*, and Ranboo feels his heart flip delightedly in his chest, manages to get a hand free and snakes it up to where Tubbo’s braid is getting lost in his mop of hair, thumbs at it gently, “M-Me too.”

It settles into a comfortable quiet after that, soft hush of late morning only broken by the occasional clicking of claws against the floorboards out in the hallway, dull noises echoing through the house that are probably Cissan making breakfast. None of this seems real, it’s a little *too* perfect, seems a little *too* fabricated, but Ranboo can feel the warm, grounding sensation of skin heated tungsten under his fingertips, gentle, even beating of Tubbo’s heart echoing back through where they’re laying together.

This...this *is real*, somehow someway, and Ranboo is honestly still struggling to wrap his head around the idea that last night happened, that he and Tubbo sat out on a rock under the stars and said I love you, both fully understanding what that meant this time. *He made me a bead*, Ranboo thinks for probably the one hundredth time, still just as deliriously confused and happy as last night when Tubbo first held it out in offering, *promised you everything outstretched hand come fly with me build a home with me marry me*.

Ranboo had given Tubbo the proper response after their braids were done, when they sat side by side, hands intertwined heads bent together. The traditional words floated out into the dark quiet of the night, sounding like they were only ever meant to be spoken under starlight hand in hand, *I will love you in the way no one else can*, and it was just the two of them.

It was *always supposed* to be just the two of them, there never would've been anyone else.

They were made to care for and love the other, *two pieces of the universe that recognized one another and loved one another*, and Ranboo has never felt more like he's belonged, like he finally *fits*, than right now, head nestled on Tubbo's shoulder just existing and enjoying each other's presence.

"Sooo...got anything you wanna do today?" Tubbo asks, trying for nonchalance but it sounds like he has an idea already, and Ranboo wiggles his tail around, batting it softly into Tubbo's leg while he hums, "I...didn't really have any plans in mind. Why? Is there something you wanna do?"

"I...y-yeah." Tubbo says, shifts so they can see each other better, and there's red creeping up his face, but he doesn't look away, cheek smooshed into the arm he has resting under his head, "I was thinking we could um, w-we could get our ears pierced? Er, *well*, I-I can since you- *ya'know*, b-but yeah. Oh! And then we should...*maybeprobablytellymom*."

He says that last part all in a rush and Ranboo nearly misses it, still hung up on *get our ears pierced he wants to get his ears pierced he wants to stay*, but then the rest of it registers and his pulse jumps up quickly, nervously tapping against his ribs.

Everything Ranboo knows about Mellifera culture is suddenly flying past in his mind, and he frantically combs through it trying to see if there's anything on marriage customs that he's missed, knows it's customary on some planets to ask permission first, so was he supposed to *ask* Cissan before marrying Tubbo? But Tubbo proposed first this time anyway- oh wait *shit*, they're not even technically married under Apian law, s-so that makes them engaged?

Maybe?

*Ugh*, he doesn't *know*, and he hates not knowing, still muddling through everything when there's a warm touch at his forehead, fingers pressing into his skin and dragging upwards, pulling his eyebrows up with it. "Stop it, stop overthinking." Tubbo chides, rapping him lightly on the forehead, smooths that hand into Ranboo's hair before he can start complaining, "Ranboo. You *absolute goon*, she is going to be *so excited*. I don't think you're prepared for the amount of high pitched screeching that is going to happen."

“I- y-yeah?” Ranboo asks shakily, tipping his head into Tubbo’s hand and nuzzling at his palm, purrs happily when fingers run up the length of his horn, doesn’t really feel much like anything, it’s just comforting. Making a noise of affirmation, Tubbo draws his fingers back down and rests his hand lightly on the side of Ranboo’s neck, twiddling with the long strands of his hair, “Yes. And honestly? She’s going to give you *one thousand* hugs, tell you how happy she is that you’re gonna be a part of the family...and then she’ll whack me upside the head and yell at me for not asking you sooner.”

That makes Ranboo giggle a little, can picture it happening, but then the implications sink in, *not asking sooner did he tell her knowing look never said he was handsome does she know*, and he asks soft and nervous over the answer, “D-Did- uh, d-does she know a-about before? About...l-last time?”

“Last time...? O-Oh! *Oh*, n-no, no I didn’t uh, tell her anything specific?” Tubbo says, fingers picking distractedly with some loose threads of the hammock, and where the tips of his ears stick out of his hair a little, they’re bright red, “I um, I figured t-that was just between us? *Private*. B-But I did tell her we had like, a falling out? I-I didn’t blame you or anything, promise, I told her it was my fault anyw-”

“It was the *furthest* thing from *your fault*.” Ranboo huffs, reaches out and fits his fingers under Tubbo’s chin, gently presses until he’ll look up, “How could it *ever* be your fault? *I’m* the one that married *you* without consent-”

“Ugh, *okay!* Look. You shoulda explained, I shoulda *asked*, *I get it*, b-but we got it sorted. Can we just go back to being happy we *both* know we’re married now?” Tubbo whines, a pitiful, pleading expression on his face he’s making look ridiculous on purpose, draws out long and plaintive, “You *have* to be nice to me, I’m the birthday boy.”

“That. *Was yesterday*.” Ranboo reminds him primly, letting go of his chin to bap his nose a few times, and Tubbo sticks his tongue out, which only prompts Ranboo to do it again. Truthfully though, Ranboo shouldn’t be so worried over how Cissan’s going to take the news, nor how the rest of the family will, because no one even batted an eye last night, and the two of them were *anything* but subtle.

They disappeared into the night, came back over an hour later hand in hand, sat closer than they had been before all evening, hands obviously laced under the table while everyone sang Tubbo happy birthday, and not a single person said anything, acted like nothing was off. Ranboo didn’t have space in his head at the time to worry over what everyone else might think, could only stare in disbelieving awe at the braid in Tubbo’s hair, kept reaching up to touch his own, doesn’t think he uttered a coherent sentence until after presents or cake and...

Wait

*Wait*

*Presents sitting by Tubbo at the long kitchen table ankles hooked together mind lost in tracing designs on the back of his lower right hand over scars and smooth skin alike feels like you’re forgetting something watching him tear through colorful paper what’re you...wait*  
**WAIT YOU FORGOT YOU FORGOT HIS-**

“-present, *I-I forgot your birthday present!*” Ranboo yelps, hand immediately stilling in its game of poking Tubbo in various spots around his face, giving Tubbo an opportunity to win *his* game of *trying to bite Ranboo’s finger*, nips him quick before Ranboo is rolling out of the hammock. For all that it’s a seemingly simple thing, Ranboo always struggles getting into and out of it, snags his foot on loose cloth now and staggers across the room, *doesn’t fall this time though*, starts digging through his duffle while Tubbo laughs at his back.

“Wow, the one thing you’ve *ever* forgotten, and it’s *my birthday present*. I’m wounded, husband, absolutely destroyed.” Tubbo crows overly pleased, must see the way Ranboo’s hands stutter excitedly at the word *husband*, and laughs soaring and fond.

“H-Hey, I was a little *preoccupied* last night. I-I’d just gotten *married*.” Ranboo grouses affectionately, finally finds the dumb tube and hauls it out of a tangle of clothes, plagued with apprehension and nerves as he gets to his feet. He knows it doesn’t even come close to what Tubbo did for his nameday, but he’d been grasping at straws, hard to find something that didn’t look like a present a spouse would give, reminds himself *again* that Ozzi said it was perfect.

Tubbo’s sitting up in the hammock when Ranboo turns around, legs dangling over the side, bare toes not even close to skimming the floorboards. He cocks his head inquisitively as Ranboo shyly holds out the poster tube, takes it in his upper set of hands and starts trying to work the cap off.

“I- *um*, i-it’s nothing much, I just...I-I wanted to do *something*.” Ranboo awkwardly rubs at the back of his neck, eyes darting away and back to Tubbo rapidly, in parts excited to see his reaction and also dreading it. Finally getting the cap free with a quiet pop, Tubbo shuffles out the rolled up sheet of paper, very carefully starts opening it and then just, *stops*.

His eyes go wide, mouth dropping open a little, spreads it the rest of the way out and looks across the whole thing with an incredulous smile quirking his lips up. “Holy shit...did you make this?” Tubbo breathes, glancing back up at Ranboo briefly before going back to raking his eyes over the drawing, and shrugging bashfully, Ranboo stammers, “I-I *uh*, y-yeah.”

“Queens past... ‘*no real talent*’ my *ass*.” Tubbo huffs exasperated, but undeniably fond, fingers gentle as he works on flattening the paper, other set tracing carefully over clean lines and sharp angles. It didn’t take Ranboo long to figure out what he wanted to draw, but it took *days* to get the level of complexity he wanted.

It’s a good sized sheet of poster paper, let Ranboo get hyper detailed like he couldn’t when he was drawing on his arms, and there might be some slight inaccuracies, but he was working purely from memory, couldn’t sneak back down into the repair bay while Tubbo was there unless he wanted to ruin the surprise.

Sitting squarely in the middle of the paper is, *in Ranboo’s opinion*, a pretty accurate expanded diagram of one of the Eshachi’s main engines, sections of it pulled away and staggered off to the sides to expose the inner workings. Different areas of the engine are shaded in with vivid matte colors, copying a kind of color blocking style Ranboo knows Tubbo is fond of, reds, oranges and greys popping brightly off the white paper.

“Do you like it?” Ranboo hedges, tapping his fingers together and apart, worries stoking to life like embers in a stove, *not enough not good enough everything he’s done for you and this is all you did for him ungrateful entitled brat think that-* but Tubbo smiles at him like *the sun*.

“This is one of the best things I’ve *ever* gotten, I love it so much, stelle.” Tubbo enthuses gently, rolls the poster back up and tucks it safely into its tube before getting to his feet, pads over to Ranboo and only hesitates the slightest amount reaching out for him. A set of arms settle around his waist, sling over the back of his neck, and Ranboo sways forwards helplessly, *moon caught up in a gravitational pull but that’s okay that’s alright nowhere else you’d rather be*, Tubbo hushing quietly, “You’re too kind to me, I…thank you, f-for giving me a second chance, for loving me as much as you do.”

“It’s not like it’s an arduous thing, I’ve told you before, loving you is so easy.” Ranboo murmurs gently, takes a few steps forwards, relishing the way Tubbo’s arms settle around him, and with a shaky little laugh, Tubbo says summer soft, “Ti yw fy unig un, Ranboo.”

It sounds so even and smooth coming out of his mouth, *like he’s been practicing it*, and Ranboo can see then in his mind Tubbo down in the repair bay working on the Eshachi, listening to pronunciation videos instead of music. Something gooey and warm rushes out through Ranboo’s ribs, trickles in between the gaps, thinks it might be his own heart melting away as he leans down, taps their foreheads together, “Etiam amote, Tubbo.”

*This is it this is where you’re supposed to be*, Ranboo thinks with a deep, contented sigh, twisting into the contact in a continuous misguided attempt to knock their horns together, purrs rumbling to life feeling antennae brush at him, *nowhere else in the galaxy will ever make sense without him there love him love him so much and he loves you nebula and protostars and streaking comets you’re my cariad Ranboo-*

The two of them jump when Benson starts barking suddenly, end up cracking their heads together as the bombini scrabbles down the hallway in a furious skittering of little claws, footsteps and irritated Apian following after him. “Aaaah, *damn stupid mutt*.” Tubbo hisses without any real bite, rubbing at his forehead in consternation, “Why, *why is he like this-* it’s probably just my tio Osmo, s’about the time he said he’d drop by.”

“Everything okay?” Ranboo asks around a wince, bright flare of pain dulling out into an even throb, and Tubbo nods, stepping back reluctantly as he shuffles towards the door with an easy wave, “Yeah, he’s just wanting me to look at some combine that’s actin’ up, nothing major.”

“Need any help? Puffy tells me I’m good at spotting melted wires.” Ranboo offers, and looking over his shoulder with a happy, dimpled grin, corners of his eyes crinkling, Tubbo says brightly, “Always. Now come on, let’s go tell’em the exciting news, maroso.”

He holds a hand out and Ranboo more than eagerly steps forward to take it, lacing their fingers together as Tubbo swings his door open, and Ranboo is expecting to walk out into the hallway and greet Tubbo’s uncle, to stand proudly side by side and explain what their braids mean to Cissan, probably get the life hugged out of him in the process.

But what Ranboo is not expecting is for Cissan to scream, scuffling commotion out in the living room, isn’t prepared for Tubbo to shrink back automatically before surging forwards,

ripping his hand out of Ranboo's as he goes sprinting across the house, shrieking, "*AMA!*"

Ranboo stumbles forwards heart in his throat, feels like everything is happening in quick flashes, sees Cissan on the ground with a plasma rifle pointed in her face- *blink* -second figure ducking through the door white brimmed hat shading their face, pearly armor suns emblazoned on the shoulders, *hands raising with something in them- blink* -Tubbo going rigid, *Tubbo screaming*, falling to the ground like his limbs completely locked up *body twitching worst thing most reviled nightmare did he just get sh-*

Next blink and Ranboo is *gone*, crashing into the enforcer with a feral howl, takes them both to the floor, driving knees and elbows down like he was taught, brings his claws slashing across the man's face with all the fast flying brutal savagery he's capable of. The enforcer screams and tries to buck him off, but Ranboo *knows how to fight*, moves with him, *has been here before has done this before has almost killed someone barehanded before*, pulse roaring in his ears as he slams fist after fist into his face.

There's blood *everywhere, splashed across pale skin dripping off his claws dripping slow plip plip plip into flames that seethe and rage and you've got to get him out*, and it's hard to think all of a sudden, hard to breathe, smoke in his lungs and clouding his eyes *where is he got to find him you've got to can't let him burn can't leave him you've got to-*

Something hard and vaguely cylindrical jabs Ranboo in the gut and he can't grab the splintering ends of his mind fast enough, hears a faint click and then it feels like he's been set on *fire*. Blinding pain spreads out from that section of his body, muscles going rigid, limbs refusing to cooperate, and he crashes to the side like a statue, completely immobilized as he jerks involuntarily.

*Tased you've been tased*, Ranboo's able to haul together at least semi coherently, can only stare on in mute horror as the enforcer gets to his feet with an agonized sounding groan, watches in frozen panic as those boots careen towards him. Ranboo can't do anything to stop the foot that drives into his abdomen over and over *and over Ancients it hurts make it stop Void help him it hurts can't breathe can't c-can't bre-breathe-*

"Stupid *fucking voidling-!*" The man snarls kicking Ranboo *hard*, enough to break ribs, like he's trying to put a foot trough his abdomen, won't leave off no matter how wretchedly Cissan begs, *no matter how Ranboo chokes like he's dying*, only pulling up short when his partner snaps, "*Hey, Archica, knock it the fuck off. Go cuff the other one before he gets up.*"

"Why don't *you* fucking do it, your face isnt *filleted open*." Archica bitches but does move on after one last viscous kick, leaves Ranboo gasping for breath with what tastes like blood at the back of his throat, nothing but howling *screaming panic in his head because he said cuff he said cuff enforcers in Cissan's house hands always checking wrists for restraints your husband and he said cuff-*

"N-No! *P-Please no! Quaeso no, p-per amor delle R-Reginae!* S-Stop! H-He's a g-good boy, *s-stop-!*" Cissan pleads, sobbing desperately, and Ranboo can't see but he knows neither officer really cares, keeps frantically trying to push himself up but his body isn't responding *but if he can just move if he can just get that rifle work damnit get up you have to get to him-*

“Tubbo Underscore, you’re under arrest for destruction of imperial property, aggravated terrorism, arson, and sixteen counts of manslaughter.” Archica recites in a bored tone over Cissan’s frantic begging, like he couldn’t care less, *like he isn’t actively destroying lives gET UP*, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and *will* be used against you in a court of law- well, I mean, whenever you *can* actually talk again.”

N-No- *no no no no no no this can’t be real this can’t be happening it’s a dream a hallucination this isn’t real they’re not they can’t but they can and you can’t do anything get UP MOVE STOP THEM HELP HIM GET HIM OUT-*

“Stop fucking around, Arch, we got other shit to do.” The other enforcer sighs, their apathy so *staggering* it’s making Ranboo’s blood boil, needs to move *has to get up has to fight*, but his muscles are still spasming and *he can’t do anything-*

“You are such a buzzkill, Evalla.” Archica sighs and it’s the smallest noise, but it echoes back in Ranboo’s mind like photon cannons discharging, *clicking clack of cuffs locking over two sets of wrists strangling dread of helplessness*, “Alright, up on your feet bee, I’m not gonna carry you.”

Ranboo’s claws flex against the floorboards hearing the noise Tubbo makes as they drag him upright, *he’s hurt he’s hurt that’s your husband that’s your person and he’s hurt you’re going to let them take him*, shot of adrenaline igniting through his veins and he pushes himself up on shaking arms, struggling to get his legs to work when a boot slams into his back.

“Don’t do anything stupid, shithead, you’re on thin fucking ice already.” Evalla snaps driving Ranboo back to the floor, and he lifts his head jerkily, glaring up at the impassive face staring back at him, can feel blood bubbling up through his teeth as he spits, “G-Get your *f-fucking foot o-off me*. Do y-you have a-any idea w-who I am?”

Evalla arches a sweeping eyebrow to indicate that no, *they don’t*, and it doesn’t look like they really care either, grinds the sole of their boot down further so Ranboo really gets the message, *I’m big you’re no one sit down shut up know your place-*

But that’s not true, he *is someone*, *was* someone, and it’s been good for practically nothing, but Ranboo knows his father’s name carries *weight*, bites out as imperiously as he can, “I am R-Ranboo *Zeethotad*, third of my name, eighth child of King Z-Zeetho, Ruler of the End and All Things Beyond. Now get. *Off. Me.*”

There’s a brief pause, *just wait for the fear to set in the stammering excuses get up get him out kill them both*, but then Evalla’s mouth twitches and it’s not in a good way. “Oh yeah? And I’m the fucking empress of Nirox, nice to make your acquaintance your highness.” They drawl, long whiskers at the end of their snout flickering up in what has to be amusement, though it all quickly drops back into bland disinterest, “You done? Then keep your fucking mouth shut before I decide to take you in as well.”

Growl rumbling low in his chest, Ranboo tries to push himself up again, sees Evalla’s eyes narrow, rifle swinging in his direction, is trying to organize his thoughts enough to slip into a jump when a shaky voice he’d know *anywhere* cuts through his panic, “S-Stop! R-Ranboo, j-just *stop*. It’s g-gonna be okay, I-I’ll be okay-”

“Tubbo-” Ranboo croaks desperately, wants to see him *so badly, make sure he’s okay that he’s not hurt get up get him out get those cuffs off him*, but Evalla is strong and his body is weak. The spasms are starting to calm down though, leaves him aching but mobile, *and one chance that’s all he needs get up get that rifle shoot them both*, but then like he knows what Ranboo’s thinking, Tubbo demands, “Just- *d-do what they say*. O-Okay? C-Can you do that for me, maroso?”

*Maroso husband eyes crinkling at the corners bead flashing in his hair good morning husband love you love you so much*, and there’s the sound of feet being drug across the floor, skipping and stumbling, *he’s helpless you’re helpless can’t protect him can’t save him they’re going to take him from you*, something ripping itself to shreds in Ranboo’s chest as he begs, “N-No! No! I-I’m not l-leaving you I’m NOT-!”

“C-Call Techno. He’ll get it sorted.” Tubbo orders, and there, *finally*, Ranboo can see him, being driven forwards by Archica, face horribly pale hands bound behind him, *muddy green prison jumpsuit melting over his shoudlers can’t lose him going to lose him*, and the poorly masked terror in his dark eyes makes Ranboo’s lower lip wobble.

Tubbo’s so scared, *he’s so fucking scared right now*, this is his actual worst nightmare, being bounded up getting drug off, locked away for a mistake he so *deeply* regrets it’s practically fractured his mind in two.

And yet, no matter how much pain he’s in, *no matter how afraid he is*, Tubbo still smiles for him, though it doesn’t reach his eyes, tears gathering along his lash line, “I-I’ll be okay, p-promise. Just call Techno, h-he’ll fix it, i-it’ll be o-okay-”

“I-I’m not *l-leaving you! Please!* P-Please don’t do this- y-you’ve got the wrong person, y-you’ve got-!” Ranboo begs wretchedly, voice gone all rough and horrible, but the only people that care are the ones that can’t do anything to stop this, and the last thing Ranboo hears before Tubbo’s shoved out the front door is, “S-See you on the other side, Boo.”

“NO!” Ranboo and Cissan both howl, his getting cut short as Evalla presses down and restricting the airflow to his lungs, makes him sputter out of breath frantically. *Get up get up GET UP YOU HAVE TO GET UP*, but as soon as Ranboo tries, *shaky arms propping himself up mOVE-* there’s a hard object tapping into the back of his head and Cissan shrieks horrified.

“I’m not going to tell you again.” Evalla intones, pressing the barrel of their plasma rifle in like *they mean it*, and Ranboo wants to buck it, wants to spin around and snarl *do your fucking worst*, but Cissan is sitting *right there*, just watched her son get tased and drug out of her home, doesn’t need to watch another have his brains blown out.

It *kills* him to do it, has Ranboo growling the entire time, *sit down shut up know your place it’s there with him it’s not here kneeling under a golden boot*, but he forces himself pliant, claws gouging furious tracks in the floorboards. The rifle eases up, Evalla’s foot going with it, but Ranboo stays where he is, tendons *aching* with the need *to move to shred this person with his claws*, but knows he can’t.



As soon as he so much as *twitches* in a way the enforcer doesn't like, he's going to have a smoking crater in the back of his head, and there is so much *blistering hatred* streaking through his veins right now, Ranboo is beyond understanding why he ever supported the empire in the first place.

"Right, well...sorry about the intrusion, but we thank you for your compliance." Evalla says, boot heels clicking across the living room on their way out the door, rumble of engines kicking on outside and Ranboo feels like he's going to throw up.

"Someone will be in contact if there's a trial date, but given how old the case is, it might just skip straight to sentencing." How, *how can they say that so nonchalantly*, that's not *justice*, *that's not equality*, but Evalla doesn't miss a step, swings the door shut behind them politely with a final upbeat, "All hail the Sun Empire."

The latch clicks, and Ranboo is pushing himself up *immediately*, muscles protesting violently and he goes crashing back down, screams angrily at how his legs shake, lungs constricting tight abdomen *aching, heart cracking into a thousand bleeding pieces not real none of this is real can't be-* "FUCK YOU-! GET UP! T-They took him, get BACK HERE- t-they FUCKING took HIM! G-GET UP! GET UP YOU FUCKING USELESS-!"

"M-Melli! *Melli stop!* You're gonna hurt y-yourself, I-I know okay? I-I know b-but just *stop.*" Cissan cries, collapsing next to him in a swirl of skirts, shaking hands rubbing over his hunched back while Ranboo howls, keen ears quaking spastically when he hears the low whine of a speeder zooming off.

"NO! N-NO! No no no n-no! H-He's gone he's- HE'S GONE-!" Ranboo shrieks, and the reality of that cracks into the back of his head like a blow, sends him surging to his feet, but without anyone to support him, Ranboo collapses in a heap. His knees connect harshly with the wooden floorboards, impact rattling up through his teeth, seem to jar the sobs out of him, and Ranboo crumples over, presses his clammy forehead into worn wood and just- *wails.*

*Oh Ancients oh Void they took him he's gone he's really gone didn't stop them didn't protect him husband he's your husband and you let them lead him off in chains, claws snarl up furiously in his hair, tugging sharply and he can't breathe, thinks he might be drowning, gone gone he's gone you lost him what are you going to do need to have to get him back, liquid fire pouring back up his throat, feels like it sets his tongue on fire, leaking free into the air on every tortured exhale, what do you do what do you do scared alone scared out of your mind alone out here think you're both going to die no one's coming hey kid it's gonna be okay now-*

Ranboo forces his heaving body to *stop*, presses palms hard into his head and tries to think past the dark consuming maws of panic, because that's *not true*, s-someone did come *someone has always come then and back further bright smiles and itchy trigger fingers oranges and warm greys and fiery red cinnabar gunpowder and swirling embers it's okay kid you're okay got your back always got your-*

Warm words are being whispered into his hair, *lyrical and sweet trying to offer comfort*, but Ranboo isn't listening right now, *doesn't want careful doesn't want sweet doesn't want comfort he wants blood*, can hear something else wheezing through his mind like the beginning, terrible notes of storm wind.

*Call Techno he'll get it sorted*, echoes back through Ranboo's winding hallways, and he latches onto it like a lifeline, uses it to help haul himself out of the sinking abyss of the sand seas, comes up gasping for air but with a clearer head. He knows what he needs to do, *get up get to your feet call Techno figure out a plan sort out this mess kill them all*, and Ranboo takes a deep breath, lets it sit scalding in his lungs before letting it go, and swears embers go with it.

Standing is hard, the electrical charge Archica hit him with really fried the nerves all along his front, making using his legs difficult, but sliding up onto his knees, Ranboo gives himself a minute before pushing to his feet. He sways, *he sways* but he bends his legs, *remember being so wobbly on your feet hands on fire oppressive wet heat done this once can do it again*, stays upright through sheer force of will.

"M-Melli? What're y-you..." Cissan trails off in a jumping tone, and when Ranboo turns around jerkily, it crumples his heart up into a ball seeing how hopeless she looks, miserable tears pouring down her gaunt face, *ama that's his ama cares for him and he cares for her and they hurt her they hurt him they hurt you*.

And Ranboo hasn't been a part of this little family long but he's theirs and *they're his*, and there is no force in this galaxy that's going to stop him from protecting them. Cocking his head back, Ranboo remembers standing out in front of the court, having to have steel in his spine and the *resolve to get things done*, hauls *all of that back up*, promising heatedly because there's *no* room for argument, "I-I'm *going* to go get him *back*."

Cissan doesn't try to talk him out of it, sits on the couch with a blanket he drapes over her shoulders, Benson half in her lap, whining in time to the soft sobs hiccupping out of her chest. The worry is in her eyes though, tracking Ranboo as he moves about the house, gathering all his loose things together, but she knows better than to stop him, heard what Tubbo called him, has seen the braids.

And she might not understand, and Ranboo can't even begin explaining right now or he'll break down, but it looks like she knows anyway, a peculiar kind of aching sadness in her face, in the way a hand rubs one of her earrings, a gift from a husband she lost too.

There's not much he needs to grab before heading out, but Ranboo at least gets properly dressed, is lacing his boots up with his handheld cradled in between his shoulder and ear, waiting for the call to connect. He really thinks he's going to have to wait a while for Techno to pick up, maybe call twice, is pleasantly surprised and a little caught off guard when he hears a gruff, "Ranboo look-"

"Tubbo got arrested." Ranboo doesn't have any qualms cutting the Blood God off right now, finishes his laces with a tight bow and gets to his feet, starts pulling his hair back, "Enforcers drug him off somewhere, probably Deosorum, that's the closest imperial holding center in this sector, but we have to get to him before-"

"Just- stop for a second, okay? I need you to listen to me, calm down, think rationally don't do any-"

“I *am* thinking rationally. My partner was just *fucking arrested* and I’d like him *not to be*. ”  
Ranboo snips, tosses his ponytail over his shoulder and glares at the wall without anyone to direct it at. Unwarranted irritation bubbles under his skin at the smooth, even lilt to Techno’s voice, but that’s not really fair, *calm down calm down he’s always like this can’t fault the way he talks remember big hand on your shoulder you’re all like my family do anything for ya just calm down*.

Taking one steadying breath and then another, Ranboo forces the anxiety sparking high in him to unwind, gentles his tone to something a little less hostile, “Sorry...I-I’m sorry, it’s just...I’m a little tense right now, want to come up with a plan as soon as-”

“I know okay? Look, Phil and I are workin’ on something but I need you to. *Listen. To. Me.*” Techno enunciates like Ranboo’s life depends on it, and there’s something to his voice, *in the way his words come tumbling out frantic and panicked under the monotone something’s happened*, but Ranboo’s train of thought gets derailed briefly by seething anger, “Stay put, that’s an order, you’re not to leave Apidae unless I-”

“*Like FUCK I will!*” Ranboo snarls, claws cracking into the plastic casing of his handheld, consciously goes to untense them but they *won’t, wrong something’s wrong not right*, and Techno rumbles low, “Yes. *You will*. I told’ya, Phil and I are workin’ on something, it’s just... really complicated right now.”

*Complicated what’s complicated about this go in guns blazing get him back have the numbers have the firepower why does he sound unsure why isn’t he more concerned what does he mean working on something how does he know already something’s happened-* and Ranboo shakes his head harshly, thoughts all getting snared up and *not making any sense* as he snaps, “Tubbo just got *arrested!* Did you not *hear me?* If you think for *one second that I-!*”

“I *know*, and we’re not gonna leave him there. But we just...have to be careful, there’s other factors at play, kid.” Techno stresses and is that a shake in his voice, *unwavering pillar that’s wavering no reading too much into it calm down but it’s weird isn’t it he answered on the first ring like he was waiting like he was expecting like he knew-*

“Look, I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now, but you’ve *got* to calm do-”

*-no reaction he didn’t react when you said Tubbo was arrested shut up calm down he’s reserved but even then there was no surprise there was no further questions it was like he’d heard it before-*

“-everythin’ we can. There’s a lot going on and it’s not gonna do’im any good if you go running off tryin’ to play jailbreak, okay?”

*-Phil and I are workin’ on something how could they be how could they have any plan ready this is the first they’ve heard of unless it isn’t unless it’s not unless they’ve been sitting by the phone waiting for you to call with information they already have-*

“-complicated right now, but I ain’t leavin’ him, not for nothing. Promise, kid, we’ll get him back, we’ll get him home-”

-other factors at play have to be careful reputation of one man only thing standing in the way of unstoppable reactor heart of the fleet nuclear weapon pointed at your head you're not going to win voices of the conquered whisper in the end Nirox never kneels- and it feels like things click together and something in Ranboo snaps.

"Y-You...y-y- you fucking *SOLD HIM OUT!*" He roars, knows he put it together correctly when the line goes dead silent, lips rolling back to bare fangs he *wants to sink into a jugular*, "*You fucking BASTARD! YOU B-BASTARD!* How could you! *How could YOU-!*"

"It's not what you-! I-I didn't have *a choice!*" Techno shouts back, first time Ranboo's ever heard him raise his voice, but it does nothing against the roiling *seething nightmare* his mind has become, *turned him in gave him up you've never meant anything family never meant anything.*

"Fuck you!" Ranboo screeches, tail snapping behind him angrily, feels out of breath and dizzy with how fast his blood is pumping, takes a staggering inhale and howls, "FUCK YOU! Y-You *promised!* *You promised him he'd be safe!*"

"*I know!* I know that! I-!" Techno tries to defend and something about it just sends Ranboo over the edge, "D-Do you? *DO YOU KNOW THAT!* B-Because I don't think you do! *You p-promised he'd be safe and then FUCKING SOLD HIM OUT!* Y-You- you *betrayed HIM!*"

Static crackles loudly in his ear, nearly drowned out by how hard his pulse *roars*, like the screaming gales of a sandstorm rising to block out the sun, and there's actual ice crystalizing on the edge of his teeth as he seethes viscous and angry *and trying to hurt*, "What did it take for y-you to cave? Power? *M-Money?* What did they offer to make your word *mean nothing?* How much does it take to *buy the Blood God*, t-to make him *sell out his own PEOPLE-!*"

"*You shut your damn mouth.*" It's so quiet, barely audible, but the undercurrent of *dark violent anger* it carries makes all of Ranboo's hair stand on end, kills the words ready to spill off his tongue, leaves nothing but stunned silence on his end, "Don't pretend like you know anythin'-! Don't *PRETEND* like you know *ANYTHING that's been goin' on!*"

Techno's shouting again, and in his mind, Ranboo can see him standing behind his desk, one hand braced on the scratched surface while the other clutches too tight around his handheld, voice steamrolling down the connection, "I've been tryin' to prevent this for weeks, *WEEKS!* I tried everything I could, so don't say I don't care- don't you *ever SAY THAT!*"

"Y-You *sold him o-out!*" Ranboo cries, hand wrapped crushingly around his handheld like a lifeline, feels like he's spinning uncontrollably through the void, *something isn't adding up this doesn't make sense*, so hard to think past the mounting franticness of *searing retribution* and *fatal betrayal*.

A low growl rumbles through their connection, dull thud of what's probably a fist hitting a solid surface, "I didn't have *a choice!* It was either T-Tubbo or the Syndicate, he threatened the entire Syndicate, Ranboo, a-all ninety something of you, I-I didn't have *a choice-*"

"Bullshit! So you just- *gave up without a fight!* You're *Technoblade!* You don't give up!" Ranboo snaps incredulous, desperate *panic* pounding through his veins, because this is

*Technoblade*, the greatest warrior in the entire universe telling him *he's afraid no hope left*-  
“B-But you gave UP! YOU GAVE HIM UP! Coward! *Fucking- COWARD!*”

“SO WHAT IF I AM!” Techno roars, stuns Ranboo into silence, has never heard this much raw, ragged emotion in his voice before, “I am not invincible! I’m a person! *One* person! I’m mortal, I bleed, *I-I can lose*. I was faced with a shit, *no win* situation, and I made the call that I did because I *had to*-”

“N-No you didn’t! You didn’t even- w-we- we could’ve *fought*-!” Ranboo tries to argue, ears flicking back hearing the humorless laugh that spills through the connection, it’s desolate, it’s hopeless, *it’s a man that’s lost*, “It wouldn’t’ve been a fight, it would’ve been a slaughter.”

“You don’t *know* that! We could have-!”

“It was the entire Fourth Fleet. Thirty galleons, forty-five frigates...against *what*? Forty-eight mid classed ships? It would’ve been over before it ever began.” Techno growls, and Ranboo’s head *spins, the entire Fourth Fleet why WHY for one wanted criminal doesn’t make any sense*, parts of what Techno’s saying lost to the *panicked confusion* that eats his mind, “-of the day, I’m responsible for what happens to all of you. I-I couldn’t lead over ninety people to their d-deaths...not aga- I- d-do you know why I’m leader of the Syndicate?”

Ranboo can’t get a grip to respond properly, *strongest person you’ve ever known infallible unwavering pillar expect he’s not he bleeds just like you is scared just like you*, but Techno’s not actually looking for an answer, continues almost immediately, “I’m leader not ‘cause I’m the smartest or even the strongest. I’m leader because I’m *willin’* to make the tough decisions...and live with the consequences.”

Swallowing roughly, Ranboo tries to unstick his tongue, *tries to find words but there are none*, feels like he’s been tased again, legs shaking pathetically as true, actual helplessness washes over him. “F-Fuck, I didn’t wanna do it, Ranboo, you have no idea how bad this is *killin’ me*.” Techno huffs, and *fucking Ancients*, his voice is wet, *he’s crying you’re my family would do anythin’ for ya and he’s failed he’s let you down and it’s eating him alive*- “I-I tried offerin’ myself, heh, f-figured I’m a bigger bag than ol’ pyro, but he wouldn’t take it...he was gonna get Tubbo...one way or another.”

“B-But- *why*?” Ranboo asks broken, struggling to wrap his head around all of this, *Fourth Fleet why an entire fleet knows it knows it well patrols in the same sector as Annwyl doesn’t make sense what’s happening*, feels like he’s missing the piece to some puzzle, “I just- I-I didn’t think the emperor *cared* about the fires still. W-Why go through all this trouble for o-one person?”

“Ranboo...don’t you get it? This isn’t about Tubbo, not really.”

A cold chill washes through Ranboo, lapping at his feet like curls of frozen black sands, and there’s something looming on the horizon, but he doesn’t want to look at it, *doesn’t want it to be what he thinks searing green eyes Daysetter crown two headed dragon come home*, “W-What? I-I don’t *understand*- this- t-this is about the shipyard fires, *this is a-about*-”

“No. It’s about you, it’s...it’s always been about you.” Techno exhales exhausted, and something is ticking over in Ranboo’s mind, parts sliding together, fitting against one another in a way he doesn’t want, *messages and letters and inky black seals no way out not really all lined up in a row step forward when called no way he can’t not possible but it’s a formality going by king it’s a formality when in actuality he’s something closer to c-closer to-*

“It wasn’t the emperor who gave the order-”

*-all lined up in a row step forward when called but he’s been calling your name and you haven’t come forwards face curdling in displeasure why don’t you obey first rule one of so many you live to serve your family tell him to fling himself off the place your warrants just got bumped up you never disobey your king never disobey your-*

“-it was your father.”

The handheld slips out of suddenly slack fingers, makes a distressing noise as it cracks into the floorboards, but it sounds from miles away, spirals down into the pit Ranboo’s found himself falling into, wind tugging at his hair at his clothes, icy fingers yanking at him as he plummets towards the ground.

*Told you but you never listen should’ve listened the first time I called for you and now look what’s happened,* the darkness mutters forms itself hands claws fangs horns, searing light of two green eyes staring down at him unblinking, *you always ruin everything what happened is entirely your fault all of it the crash the arrest those scars he almost died and it’s all your fault-*

“SHUT UP!” Ranboo howls, fists his hands in his hair and stands there panting, anxiety coursing through him like a *plague*, pulse roaring in his ears as he screams guttural, “It wasn’t my fault! *It wasn’t!* I-It was *your fault*, you- *STUPID BITCH!* I-I left- I LEFT AND YOU WON’T LEAVE ME ALONE-!”

*Diseased fruit doesn’t fall far know where you belong come home,* father whispers right behind him and Ranboo shudders but he doesn’t turn around, clenches his shaking hands into fists and shrieks until his throat *aches*.

He hates them, *he hates every last one of them*, can see them all lined up in a row sneering at him and wants to gouge their eyes out, take everything they’ve ever loved and rip it away from them. “I. *LEFT.*” Ranboo snarls, teeth clacking hard together as he grinds them, can still taste blood on his tongue, and for a second, *it’s not his*, “I I-left and you FUCKERS WON’T LEAVE ME ALONE! C-Can’t you *take a hint?* Y-You all fucking hated me anyway, *why do this!*”

But Ranboo’s answered his own question, *because they hate you because you left because you made them look bad*, and he growls low and rumbling, tail whipping behind him so fast it hurts a little. This changes things, *this changes everything makes it unbearably more personal*, because father wouldn’t do something so obvert if he wasn’t serious, and Ranboo hasn’t looked underneath the underneath in a long time, but he gets the message loud and clear.

*Tired of your little game its over its done see how far my reach is come home not asking you again*

The fingers of his right hand clench and unclench, *always been his trigger fingers always been the ones to take the shot*, and they're shaking, but he knows what would steady them, *a blaster and a target*, hisses through his teeth, "*Fine. Y-You want me to come back? I'll come back.*"

Cissan doesn't ask about the screaming and Ranboo doesn't explain, bows low and offers apologies for the commotion. She hugs him regardless, all four of her arms around his back, antennae tracing over his horn, whispering brokenly in Apian, "*B-Be safe and come b-back to me, okay? A-And I don't know, Bo hasn't said anything but if it's...if you're- I-I couldn't ask f-for a better son-in-law.*"

What is he supposed to say to that, *how is he meant to respond with words*, all Ranboo can think to do is tuck Cissan closer, trilling long and mournful as he rubs his cheek into her hair. "*I'll be home soon.*" He tells her even if it's not the truth, knows he's not coming back until he has Tubbo at his side and a blaster pointed at anyone that thinks he should be elsewhere, "*I-I'll be home with him soon, mom.*"

She sees him out the door, skirts ruffling in the cool morning breeze, and it's so jarring compared to the last time Ranboo left her house adrenalin high and jittery excited, racing after Tubbo through long waving grasses. Now, he trudges along the red dirt road alone, braid swinging free, bead on the end insurmountably heavy, silence and the memory of screams ringing in his ears.

Ranboo cuts across the barren fields to get back to the Eshachi, can't brave going into town, knows they must all know, Avelare is small, word'll spread fast and he doesn't need scores of dark eyes brimming over with tears aimed at him. *They thought they'd lost him before just got him back only to lose him again*, he thinks bitterly, cresting a ridge and thankfully finds their ship undisturbed where they left her, angry, furious adrenaline whirring to life in his chest like engines starting up, *but I'm going to get him back have a target know where I'm going never miss my shot.*

He's hardly ever been in the Eshachi by himself, has *never* flown it, and the cockpit feels wide open and barren being in there alone. There's too *much space*, and he hesitates for too long, burning precious time as his hand claws over the back of Tubbo's chair, *the one he needs to sit down in*, the one he almost can't bring himself to sit down in.

It's so incredibly disconcerting to be in the pilot's seat, *like he's intruding like he's not supposed to be here*, but Ranboo doesn't have a *choice*, goes through the takeoff procedure with shaking hands and hazy eyes, blinking rapidly at the message waiting for him on the HUD.

**Bossman:**

10:37

>> Stay put, that's an order. Phil and I will work on a plan, but you're playing right into your father's hands if you go after him. This is what he wanted, don't give him the satisfaction. You're smart, I know you'll make the right decision.

"I *have*." Ranboo growls under his breath, engines rumbling to life, sets the turbines spinning and starting their gentle song, *come with me come fly with me come see the stars*, and as the Eshachi lifts beautifully off the ground, he pecks out a quick, short message.

### **Bossman:**

11:38

<< This is a family matter, stay out of it.

Ranboo then blocks any and all lines coming from HQ for the time being, makes sure the Syndicate trackers are disabled even though Techno will know where he's headed. There's not much he's going to be able to do to stop him anyway, Ranboo is currently closer to Annwyl than HQ, and if father really has called the Fourth Fleet back, no one's getting through this sector unless he *wants* them to.

It feels like his fingertips are burning off again as he types out *Annwyl* into the autopilot, doesn't trust his own lack of skills and the roiling mess his mind is to get him there in one piece, stiffly settles back as the Eshachi jumps to lightspeed, arms crushed bruising over his front, and *waits*.

The flight won't be long, a few hours at most, but it gives Ranboo plenty of time to sit and stew and grow progressively more angry, keyed up as he cycles back through everything. It should've been clear from day one where this was headed, when Ranboo got that first message on his handheld, when it was clear they were going to keep escalating the issue, and yet *he never did anything*.

Ranboo knows how controlling his family is, understands that while they may have ignored him, they were all hyper aware of each other, *had* to know where everyone was and what their pawns were doing at all times. One of his siblings probably knew he'd left Nirox hours after the Eshachi had jumped to warp, might've sat on that information waiting to see if it was useful or not, but the rest would've figured it out quickly.

*You established yourself as a threat you showed them you could play their games*, father tells him from off to the left, looming half through a control panel since Ranboo's not in his usual chair, *of course they've been keeping tabs on you are you honestly so stupid to think they wouldn't keep an eye on you, to think you could get away that easily?*



“Shut *up*, I just- none of them ever *liked me*, never c-cared for me, I didn’t think they’d give a shit.” Ranboo argues, keeps his head facing forwards as hyperspace streaks past, sees father drift a little closer out of the corner of his eye, *doesn’t matter if they rejoiced or not you may have removed yourself from the board but you’re still a player in this game you can’t just leave-*

“Yes. I can.” Ranboo interrupts fluidly and flexes his hands around his arms, no threat of claws, just feeling the muscle that’s built up these last few months, “I had every right to leave and the only reason I’m going back now is to shoot my father in his stupid face and get my husband back.”

*You can’t be serious*, father demands in a monotone that’s edging up into incredulity, and unholstering his blaster, Ranboo spins it around in his fingers, lazily rolls his head to the side and points the barrel at the flickering image next to him.

“He almost got us killed, had my *husband arrested right in front of me.*” His finger flicks the safety off easily, comes to rest grounding over the trigger, *itchy trigger fingers don’t hesitate good shot sharp eyes*, “He’s a manipulative, lying bastard that let me and my siblings all try to kill one another for *years*, probably knew I threw myself off the roof and *never said anything*. I should shoot him ten times over just for that.”

It would be so easy to take the shot, *to put a smoking hole right between those dead, green eyes*, but Ranboo relaxes his hand, snaps the safety back on and drops the blaster in his lap, returns to staring listlessly out the viewport, “But I’m not going to. If I kill the fucker, Reshaa becomes queen, and there is nothing I want less than her bitch-ass on the throne.”

*So what’s your plan if you’re not going to threaten him how do you expect to get the boy back*, the specter asks and Ranboo scoffs at the thing’s apparent confusion, *Ancients these things are dumb and he’s supposed to have made them how pathetic*, “I never said I wasn’t going to threaten him, my father just isn’t afraid of death.”

*Just like I used to be*, Ranboo thinks, slipping a thumb under the cuff of his jacket to trace over the bumpy lines of scars, and it wasn’t a bravado thing, thinking nothing could take him down, and it wasn’t about meeting a just end, knowing he’d given his life for a worthy cause.

No, it was a freezing apathy, pale disinterest with life in general, thinking that in the grand scheme of things, it didn’t really matter if you lived or not. He never used to be afraid of dying, *used to welcome it the idea*, and it’s taken Ranboo this long to figure out he’d rather *live*, but he’s not sure his father has, can’t find a single memory where it looked like he was enjoying drawing air into his lungs.

“We’re similar in that way.” He murmurs, remembers sitting out in the icy cold memory garden all night, wondering if it’d be better to leave it all behind, and only now thinks about how many times his father used to catch him out there, wonders if he was thinking the same behind those blank eyes, “We...*fuck*, w-we have that in common I guess.”

There’s a special kind of numbing hell recognizing traits of yourself in your parents, understanding that that’s where you got it from, *the original source*. Ranboo knows he’s not

his father, and yeah, he *can* be just as cruel and manipulative and apathetic as him, but he's choosing *not to be*, to stop listening to all the hateful things they poured into him.

"I am not *you*." Ranboo stresses, looking down at his speckled hands, at the red cuffs of his jacket, can feel the weight of his braid and the low even thrum of the *thing* at his core, *the star the thing that loves him the thing that is him*, flexes his fingers and relishes the way his tendons move, "But I think you might be a little bit like me."

The Eshachi croons under his feet, faint vibrations that roll up his legs, through his bones, pulsate in time to the heavy beating of his heart, and watching the *Time To Arrival* ticking down, Ranboo feels the heady nauseousness of *anticipation* wheeze to life, dizzying spike of adrenaline right before a fight breaks out, asks the empty air, "Do you know what terrifies my father?"

It's not a concept Ranboo was very familiar with until recently, the thought that his father could be afraid, that he had to have things that kept him up at night, *bags under his eyes exhaustion weighing him down no rest for men like me*. The specter doesn't say anything, likely because it doesn't know, because it's a stupid, hollow thing Ranboo created and then gave nothing else to, it's a shell, *a house with all the lights out it doesn't know anything*.

But Ranboo knows, and they're not the same but they're similar enough for him to understand, to see flashes of himself, *his mannerisms his neurotic tendencies his fears*, echoed back from the generation before.

"He's afraid of losing control over *everything*." Ranboo says and nothing has ever been more true, *something he understands so very painfully*, and it's the helpless fury of watching your partner suffer, of knowing others dictate the events of your life, *spiraling lost and confused through the void*, and Ranboo flexes his fingers, "And I'm about to show him he's not as untouchable as he *assumes*."

The rest of the trip is silent, gives him too much space to think, mind spiraling continuously end over end worrying about Tubbo, about what he must be feeling, *going through*, anger and *retribution* building up under his chest like storm clouds on the horizon. *We're good people we didn't deserve this any of it*, Ranboo seethes, starting to get antsy watching the timer tick down, *swears* it has to be going slower somehow, *we both have scars he's scared to fly now my hands still shake we'll never be the same and it's all because my father couldn't concede a fight that was already over*.

"Over before it began..." Ranboo murmurs into the soft white noise of the cockpit, broken handheld a deadweight in his pocket, empty comm list on the HUD seeming to stare at him accusingly, *eyebrow cocked red eyes locked on yours used to be proud now they're just disappointed*. He swallows past a tight pain in his throat, thinks he might be realizing not every fight is one that needs to be won, that sometimes, the best thing to do is just let go, no matter how much it hurts.

With shaking hands, Ranboo tabs through the preferences on the HUD for messages, finds the *blocked contacts* list and winces as he reopens the lines between the Eshachi and HQ. He knows he messed up, said things he shouldn't have said, but he's always been weak when it comes to Tubbo, any perceived threat to him riling Ranboo up to the point of madness.

*That doesn't excuse it*, Ranboo thinks, chewing on a thumb and waiting for the messages to blow up, to have a *hundred* notifications of angry words on his screen, and it is somehow so much infinitely worse when there is just one, curt little *okay* that says more than it has any right to.

And he doesn't even know *where* to begin, *it's my cariad my other half they took him the father that ignored me my entire life has now decided I'm worth his time scared I was so scared you're my idol you're so strong didn't like hearing you weren't infallible*, just starts typing and hopes he finds what he means along the way.

-

**Bossman:**

12:02

>> okay

17:45

<< I'm so sorry. It was really out of line to say all the things I did. I just...get really stupid when it comes to Tubbo and I hope its not a problem but its because we're married? I don't know if that matters in the Syndicate or not but yeah

<< I know I'm disobeying orders, and I'll face whatever the consequences are no complaint but I have to do this. I know you think I'm playing right into my father's hands, and I probably am, but I've been playing this bullshit game my entire life and I can win it.

<< If you don't hear from me in a few hours assume I'm dead or detained. I understand that you probably won't be able to rescue me a second time, but I guess as a last will or whatever, just keep trying to get Tubbo out. Please.

<< Thanks for everything Techno. You're a good leader, I never should've said you weren't.

Ranboo smooths his shaking palms down his arms after he closes out of the messaging app, grows stiffer and more anxious the longer the silence drags on, stomach roiling and tying itself into knots. If Techno hates him that's fine, if he kicks Ranboo out of the Syndicate that's fine, he'll be an adult about it, own up to his mistakes and sit through the judgment that is doled out deservedly.

You think he'd know better by now, but a lot of this has been two steps forwards, one step backwards, feels like he learns something, thinks he's progressed, and then a stressful situation comes up and Ranboo backslides *instantly*. It's a panic response, he *knows that*, but what's the point of knowing things if they don't help, if you can't apply them?

He can tell himself all he wants that he's doing better, and he is to an extent, when he can think straight, but for a lot of the time, trying to navigate the healing process has felt like flailing around unseeing, just hoping he stumbles to where he needs to go.

And that's not helpful and that's not constructive, and his friends have been helping him along the way, have done so much for him, but Ranboo can't keep relying on them entirely. They have their own things to deal with, it's unfair of him to keep using them like crutches, not when there's other options...not when there's others he could talk to.

The thought still makes him nervous, *probably will until he actually does it*, but a lot of things have made him nervous until he actually does them. It's finally at the point where Ranboo feels like he needs to take that next step, make plans to move forwards, somewhat confident and secure enough to ask for more professional help.

*After this is over*, Ranboo thinks, claws tapping a nervous staccato against his arms, wishes the anxiety would ease back and let his heart rest, but it's thundering wild and out of control under his ribs and he's just got to ride it out, *once this is over I'll find someone after I get him back maybe we can go together maybe it won't be so bad...*

But Ranboo has to get through this hell-fest first, where every second ticking down feels like time wasted, and at this point, Tubbo is probably in a jail cell, and Ranboo has to make a mad dash for the bathroom before he throws up.

Tubbo is in a jail cell, *Tubbo is in a jail cell*, and Ranboo can't *do anything about it* for another hour and a half, maybe longer, depends on how long his father insists on being a fucking imperial ass-wipe.

By the time the autopilot alerts him to drop out of lightspeed, Ranboo is so tightly wound up his muscles are *aching*, creak and crack like buckling plastisteel as he follows along to memories of Tubbo's piloting, heart twisting up painfully. "I-I'm coming just- *p-please*, b-be okay until I get there." He whispers ragged, has to sniff hard as he follows the motions of easing the Eshachi out of lightspeed, "I-I'm sorry it's taken so l-long, but I'm coming to get y-you, *I-I'm not leaving you.*"

The blurry lines of hyperspace fade out, and sitting there, like a frozen *miserable* hole in space, *dark craggy surface weakly reflecting light spiderwebs of teal ignited on the surface no imperial satellites here empire's most treasured possession*, is Annwyl.

"Alright you stupid fucks." Ranboo murmurs, unsurely wraps his hands around the controls and begins the approach to the planet, toes curling painfully in his boots, "It's show time."

Reentry is rough, *Tubbo makes it look so easy*, but Ranboo manages to get through the uppermost layers of the atmosphere in one piece, streaks down through wispy clouds and just waits for the alert from ground control to come through, demanding he turn back or get shot down.

But it never comes, his approach to Voidfall going largely ignored in a way that doesn't scream of negligence but rather expectance. *Knew you would be coming preparations in place can't be surprised don't forget who your opponent is*, Ranboo thinks, grinding his teeth

together as Cyllellniad races below the Eshachi, a glimmering, *poisonous* net of shining lights he *never* wanted to see again, the sand seas a dark smudge on the horizon, Voidfall rising above it all like a vile, cresting wave.

*Welcome home welcome back Prince of the End*, the city seems to sigh, rushing up under the Eshachi as he dips lower, like it's coming in for a hug, *missed you did you miss us used to know you so well*, the parapets snicker smugly overhead as he rounds the palace looking for an open landing pad, *finally back finally where you belong don't leave this time*, massive stone statues of the Forefathers' boom, staring down at him disapprovingly as he lands, and as soon as Ranboo gets a hand free, he flips the entire place the bird.

"Go to actual *fucking* hell." He snaps, can already see figures popping into existence out on the landing pad, hurriedly powers the Eshachi off and knows he needs to act fast. The more time his father has to himself, the more difficult he's going to be, will try and break Ranboo's resolve before ever meeting with him face to face.

Ranboo slides down into the cargo hold, makes sure his hip holster is visibly empty but tucks a blaster into the waistband of his pants, slides a thermal knife into his jacket sleeve, and its muscle memory, keeping it in place without looking like he's armed.

The frigid wind rushes in as the bay's doors grind open, and Ranboo zips his bomber up, starts wondering when *this* felt cold to him, when it felt more natural and right having the sticky hot breeze of an Apidae summer tangling through his hair, than the icy bite of his home planet.

Ranboo wasn't expecting any of his family to be out here, and they're *not*, but it still rankles deep in him that even after everything, all the *shit* they pulled to get him back here, they still just sent servants out to fetch him like he's an uninteresting package. It's at least not the ones he despises, Handlers Three and Four curse them both to the Void, but he does recognize one of them and his mind starts working *fast*.

*Oh fucking Ancients of course he sent her little right hand of the king poisonous snake not ideal can't waiver don't bare your throat*, Ranboo glowers, sweeping down the cargo ramp like an incoming sandstorm, and when he's closer, can more easily pick out the other handler, his ears perk up, *really-really they sent **him** with **her** that's...interesting did father not know they're-*

"Ah, welcome home, young prince, we've been eagerly anticipating your arrival." The shorter of the two says, *Mirnaa father's personal aide if she's here he's busy doing something else doesn't need her plans on making you wait*, and faster than they can likely see, Ranboo zips into a jump. He comes out right behind Mirnaa, wraps a hand around the back of her neck to stop her teleporting and brings his blaster up next, presses the barrel against her skull as he demands, "Where's my father."

"I-I- *your h-highness!*" She stammers, playing at being afraid, but she's the principle aide to the king, meaning she's one of the best, most ruthless assassins in the entire palace, has more black blood on her hands than runs through the entire court's veins. Ranboo's not stupid enough to underestimate her, makes sure he's got enough space in case a dagger comes

swinging back at him, tightens his grip to stop her fake panic and snarls, "I'm not asking again. *Where. Is. My. Father.*"

Mirnaa whimpers and does a very convincing involuntary shudder, but he recognizes the gesture, knows she just shook a knife down into her left hand, and flips the safety off without any remorse. That quiet click finally gets her to go still, and they all wait in tense silence, Ranboo not giving an inch, and Mirnaa huffs out an unamused laugh, "My...how you've changed, your highness, so brazen...*so violent.*"

"You've been keeping tabs on me, haven't you? So I'm sure you know I'm not really one for hesitating with my shots." Ranboo murmurs low, and where his fingers are curled over the back of her neck, he can feel her pulse pick up, eyes narrowing like he's just spotted a target, "Wanna take your chances, Mirnaa? Think I'll miss?"

"I serve the king, I do not *serve you.*" Mirnaa declares, tips her head back in a fatal display of loyalty, and she's not going to break, she'd be a terrible assassin if the threat of a quick and painless death would make her spill, but he's not working on her right now.

"Suit yourself." Ranboo shrugs casually, goes to pull the trigger and just like he was hoping, the other servant cries out, "*W-Wait!*"

"*Etinen.*" Mirnaa warns and the handler clams back up, forces his face neutral but Ranboo caught that instinctual, raw look of pure horror, tips his head to the side and regards Etinen with a slitted gaze, *got you.* He wonders what they've all been told, if they know Ranboo beat a man bloody, has shot people at point blank range, and all of them already thought he was crazy, he wonders how much worse it is now.

*He wonders if he can use that to his advantage.*

Nestling his blaster a little further into Mirnaa's hair, Ranboo watches Etinen closely, and he doesn't react much, he's a royal servant after all, but Ranboo has always been good at picking people apart, rolls his head to the side and says lazily, "The way I see it, you've got two options. Either tell me where my father is, or I shoot your cariad in the head."

The two of them both tense, and Etinen's eyes widen a fraction, *terror* clouding their bright green and it's *how do you know how did you find out never said never wear beads how do you know*, but that's Ranboo's thing right, *knowing everything.*

"I've been gone a while, so I guess you've forgotten. Let me remind you then." Ranboo croons, curls a finger back around the trigger, keeps his expression completely open, lets every single ounce of *anger* and *resentment* storm across his face, and finds dark amusement in the way Etinen's throat bobs, "There's *nothing* I don't know."

It looks like *years* worth of panic flash across Etinen's face, like he's remembering very transgression that's ever been done to Ranboo, *everything he has to be furious over insane little prince finally snapped*, and playing the part for once, Ranboo hisses, "So...what about you? Think *I'll miss?*"

In the end, Etinen breaks, Ranboo gets what he wants, shoves Mirnaa forwards just as she's turning, throws himself backwards into a jump but isn't quite fast enough, cheek getting nicked with one of her daggers before he completely dematerializes.

Voidfall is rigged with electromagnetic sensors that set off alarms if someone teleports across them, but it's not *infallible*, there's chinks in the armor, small, out of the way places where servants and nobles sneak in and out. Ranboo spent the better part of a year ferreting them all out, used it to corner people for leverage, threatening to get the leaks patched up, and he's glad he never followed through on those threats.

Mirnaa will have raised the internal alarms by now, have the guards looking for him, and they may know the palace as well as him, but they can't *teleport* like him, minds not fast enough at picking out coordinates, likely only have a small list memorized.

And that's where Ranboo outpaces them *all*, because he doesn't just have a list memorized, he has the entire floorplan of Voidfall in his mind, can overlay the longitude and latitude lines of the planet and calculate coordinates faster than the rest of them can *blink*.

He zips over walls and into shadowed doorways, drops out into rooms he *knows* are abandoned to catch his breath before pushing on, winding his way deeper into the heart of the palace. The guards spot him a few times as he gets closer, *try to grab him a few times*, but all they remember is the child that used to flail at them, aren't prepared for someone that *can fight back*.

Ranboo's quick and light on his feet, doesn't pull his punches and knows how to move with a blow, fights like Dream taught him, *fights dirty fights like he means it*, takes Ender twice his age with double the experience to the ground because they *underestimate him*. He keeps his claws in check though, doesn't want to hurt any of them fatally, wouldn't have shot Mirnaa if it really came down to it, understands that they're all in the same boat.

Every living soul in Voidfall is at the mercy of someone, acting under orders they may not want to follow or have been manipulated into thinking it's okay to follow, *that this is all life is*. It's easier to see when you step back, get the entire picture, all of it coming together like the most macabre of tapestries, so many lines of toxic deceit and subterfuge woven together, there's no way to untangle the whole thing.

And most of them don't get the chance Ranboo got, had someone care enough to offer him a way out, patient enough to stay by his side while he's slowly been attempting to untangle all his own threads, someone that's *loved him regardless*.

Someone that's currently terrified and alone in an imperial jail cell, wondering if he's been forgotten, and so maybe he hits them all a little harder than strictly necessary.

*Not left you not leaving you please wait*, Ranboo pants, resting up against the side of a wall while his body shakes uncontrollably, feels like he has frostbite setting in with how numb his extremities are. Everyone has their limits, and Ranboo's reaching his, *freezing fire burning through his veins creeping up over his pearl have to be careful have to be careful not to shatter it*, can only make about one to two more jumps before he'll *have to stop*.

He's close, *he's so close though*, still too far to feel comfortable teleporting straight into the meeting room, so he races down gloomy corridors, dodges guards as best he can, heart thundering under his skin like the pulsing beat of engines running at full warp. *Little further little farther you can do it please just a little longer*, Ranboo throws himself to the side, twisting around the armored hand that swipes out at him, feels something twinge in his calf but launches himself forwards anyway, fiery hot pain racing up his leg that means he's torn a muscle most likely, or just pulled it *bad*.

*Ancients it fucking hurts*, but he's got to push through it, *has to keep going*.

Problem is though, he hasn't been fast enough, the guards have had time to get messages around. The ones that meet Ranboo now are *prepared* for a fight, drive him back limping and one even manages to land a hand on him, and while Ranboo's able to squirm away, he's painfully aware his time is up.

And backed into a corner, *literally mentally emotionally can't think can't think can't leave him*, Ranboo does one of the stupidest things he's ever done in his entire life, takes a deep breath, and teleports straight into the meeting room.

*The furthest any Ender can safely teleport is around a hundred yards*, some memory of an instructor drones in his ears as reality fades out, *do not try and push beyond that*, and then there's *nothing blackness as far as he can see feels like he's being crushed out of existence*, but it's not an instance, it's not a moment, *it drags on it WON'T STOP, if you do exceed your limits*, crushing sucking destroying EVERYTHING- *the vacuum of interdimensional time space will destroy you-*

You can't breathe in a vacuum, *but it feels like he's screaming regardless, lungs trembling and rattling and COLLAPSING in his chest, bones splintering apart so much pressure everywhere it's suffocating it's squashing him in between the fingers of reality and he's going to die this was so stupid he's an idiot warped out of existence thinks he feels something crack in his chest-*

There's suddenly *light and air voices yelling and oh thank fuck*, Ranboo tripping out of midair and crashing into a hard surface, mind *reeling* while he drags in wheezing sips of oxygen, coughs violently as he's yanked backwards and slammed to the floor. He spits blood out of his mouth, tries to breathe past the knee driving into his spine *pinning him down*, everything filtering into his ears ringing and warped, sees a pair of gilded boots step into view, *coiling two headed dragon fucking bitch no rest men like me*, tips his head up and grins *feral, "S-Surprise."*

Father doesn't smile, *he never smiles*, looks down at Ranboo with something like disgust, brows all drawn up weird, and because he's *not* thinking, is *incredibly pissed off and furious and out of his mind*, Ranboo tilts his head and spits a mouthful of drippy black blood all over his father's shoes. That gets his face smashed into the floor by the guard pinning him, but Ranboo just cackles like a crazy person, tries flexing his wrists and grunts when there's no give.

*Not ideal nothing about this is ideal Tubbo's been arrested yeah I know we're working on it oh hell that actually hurt*, Ranboo winces at where his forehead struck the glossy black tiles,



thinks he's probably bleeding, stops struggling though when *that voice* intones, "Let him up this instant."

"But your majesty he-"

*Wuh oh wrong thing to say don't disobey orders don't disobey your king gonna lose your head*, and sure enough, father's voice goes *particularly* icy and Ranboo grins lopsided, "I said. Let. Him. Up. That is my son, and you will not treat him like a *common criminal*."

"Oh s'this how you treat criminals? 'Cause s'honestly one of the better welcome home receptions I've gotten." Ranboo slurs as he's yanked up, goes unwilling and unhelpful, plants his feet though once he's standing and tips his chin back, meeting his father's gaze head on as he snarls, "Oh wow! Actual face to face *and eye contact*? S'my nameday or summin-"

"Ranboo. *What* are you doing here?" Father demands, and it's strange, might be the mild head injury talking, but his voice really doesn't boom or carry all that much, it...it sounds kinda weak actually, and Ranboo shrugs his shoulders, taking a discrete look around the room, "Oh...you know, figured you wanted to see me so bad, *shouldn't make you wait*."

All of the advisors are here, *big meeting then*, trying not to act like they're watching, *fucking nest of cobras*, what look like Sunfleet representatives staring blatantly, *important meeting then good this'll be good*, and then stepping up besides father *little gap in her front teeth smile like an oil slick Moontide circlet scuttle away little shadow no one wanted you stay out of my way fucking BITCH-*

"Oh, *Ran*, what an unexpected surprise." Reshaa coos, tilting her head to the side and sending all her jewelry swinging, long line of her cariad braid tucked behind an ear, *looks sloppily done nothing like yours looks like an obligation*, smile she gives him devoid of *anything* but cruel amusement, "Oh dear, you certainly seem like you've seen better days. What's the matter little brother? *Head bothering you?*"

*Is she...fucking serious*, Ranboo squints his eyes at her because is that it, is *that* the best she could come up with, that's just...*that's just pathetic*. He's heard worse from *himself*, from idiots he passes on the street, *from the actual living version of a nightmare shot that one right in the gut*, and Ranboo snorts, shakes his head a little to set his braid swinging.

He left it free when he pulled the rest of his hair back earlier, and he sees the *exact* second Reshaa spots it, nostrils flaring in what's always been her tell, something *truly* nasty slipping into her gaze as Ranboo simpers, "Hey, Res, how're you? How're the twins? Decide which one you're going to let die yet?"

It's very brazen, *it's a little out of line*, but Ranboo has decided he *does not care*, jolt of laughter punching out of his mouth watching Reshaa try not to react, hair bristling with poorly suppressed anger, "How *dare you!* Don't talk about *my sons* you little *psychopath I-!*"

"Enough. Both of you." Father snaps and it makes Reshaa clam up, going blank in the way all of them were taught, but almost reclining back into the hold the guard has on him, Ranboo rolls his eyes, kicks his feet back and drawls, "Oh come on, what's a little playful bickering between siblings? Some...*casual* threats, *well meaning fratricide-*"

“I said *enough*-!”

Lurching forwards with more speed and strength than the guard was likely expecting, Ranboo gets pretty close to his father’s face before he’s jerked back, snarling through bloodstained teeth, “*No! I don’t have to listen to a single thing you say! You’re not my damn king! You’re not my FUCKING FATHER!*”

The meeting room goes dead silent, pressure dropping like right before a storm hits, icy winds rushing in to steal everyone’s breath and leaving them mute. Dozens of eyes swivel unabashedly to stare at father, *at Ranboo*, who tips his head up defiantly, *fucking try me think you’re gonna win not a chance*, refuses to break eye contact as father just stares at him blankly. They’re all looking at father to see what he’ll do, *how he’ll reprimand Ranboo as a father punish him as a king*, and without so much as twitching a single facial muscle, he orders monotone, “Rakhee, please escort Ranboo back to his chambers, I’ll speak with him la-”

“Oh I don’t think so.” Ranboo snaps, planting his feet firmly in case Rakhee gets any stupid ideas, ready to shift his weight quickly if need be, and narrows his eyes into something dangerous, “I’m not going anywhere, we’re talking *now*.”

“Ranboo I don’t have time for-”

“Raennaron.” It’s just one word, *one name one thing*, but it does what nothing else has ever been capable of doing, makes father speechless, *makes him emote*. His mouth falls open the barest amount, *face twitching incredulous look in his eyes you know how did when not possible*, and Ranboo sticks his chin out, *is possible not as good as you think not as safe as you think never paid attention never saw what I got into*.

Too many nights spent wandering the halls trying to find information, trying to find sleep, *trying to find a way to get rid of himself*, stumbling across a lot of things in the process, bits and pieces his mind filed away for a later date but *never* forgot, and this was one of them, nestled at the heart of the most secure archives he’d ever broken into.

*Your move*, Ranboo wants to mouth but knows he doesn’t need to, and wetting his lips quickly, father finally breaks eye contact to look back at Rakhee, expressionless mask clicked back into place *but there’s cracks*, “Give us the room.”

Those that know don’t question it, are quick to file out, but the ones that don’t linger suspicious and prying. They’re trying to put two and two together, connect the dots, understand what a story about a mythological doppelganger has to do with anything, keep looking back and forth between where Ranboo’s getting patted down by the guards and father’s unyielding spine. One of the guards takes his blaster and knife, but Rakhee lets go of his wrists and Ranboo flexes his fingers out, knows if it really came down to it, he’d win in a hand to hand fight against his father.

And *that* makes his head spin like nothing else, terrible euphoria and pride clogging up his veins, just *knowing* he could take down the thing that’s haunted him for so long, loomed disapproving and uncaring over his shoulder since the day he was born.

The meeting room is almost completely empty, just Ranboo, his father and naturally, *predictably always there*, Reshaa hovering at his side, claws tapping *one two one two* into her arms. She's shadowed him ever since her court debut, trained to be a carbon copy of what Voidfall expects from its monarch, *cold calculating ruthless*, and father has raised her well in that regard, but without turning to even *look* at her, he orders, "You are dismissed, daughter."

"Excuse me." Reshaa asks like she can't believe she's *having* to waste air on it, claws stilling as they coil over her arms, stares at father like he just up and started speaking actual gibberish, "You can't be *serious*. Father, need I remind you that I am your *heir*? Learning how to maintain the realm is of chief import, and you'd be depriving me of-"

"Reshaa. *Leave*. I will not ask again."

Her mouth clicks shut, and it's really disturbing, watching the way her face bleeds *into nothing*, fist brought up to her chest as she bows formally, words coming out of her mouth but *it's not her voice it's not hers it's no one's*, "Of course honored father, I apologize for my insolence."

Ranboo shivers as Reshaa sweeps past, *back straight chin level keep your claws out of sight eyes even blank smile no fangs*, hates to think *he* used to be like that, that he had to strip everything away and bury it deep, *little doll little shadow little puppet on its strings-*

"How could you do that to us?" Ranboo suddenly finds himself asking, watching the doors swing shut behind Reshaa, guards stepping out after her and closing them with a muffled boom, "Did you even *feel* anything, knowing what you were doing? Or did you just not *care*? Did you ever-?"

"How do you know." Father interrupts coldly, and twisting back around, Ranboo comes face to face with *the king*, all devastatingly harsh commanding presence and narrowed green eyes, hadn't realized how much his guard had been down until now.

He's got that look on his face, or rather the absence of a look, that means he's about to be difficult on purpose, *so many lessons so many different words all boiling down to the same point obfuscate talk around the subject never address it*, but Ranboo doesn't have the time nor patience to play this stupid game anymore.

"First off, you're not as smart as you *think* you are." He says, taking a step forwards drawing himself up to his full height, *all the files laid out for you years and years of data and experiments conclusions none of them wanted*, knows he has blood on his face in his teeth, *spelled out in frantic letters like the hand writing them didn't want them to be true fabrication possible*, bares fangs in a nasty smile as he hisses, "And secondly, *I'm* smarter than you *ever* gave me credit for."

"That didn't answer my question." Father says like he has *any* right to, like he's allowed to stand there and demand things of Ranboo after everything, *after getting him shot down having his husband arrested after abandoning him to the freezing cold winds-*

"Let me explain how this is going to go." Ranboo barks loudly, hands balling up into fists at his side, "You're *going* to have my partner released immediately, or I'm *going* to become the

biggest fucking problem you've *ever had*."

Father stops for a second, eyes boring into Ranboo trying to figure out if he's bluffing, if he would really sell out their entire planet to Nirox, and Ranboo glares back at him hotly, anger and retribution *and every screaming terrible thing he feels for this place in his eyes*, never more clear what his intentions are than if he'd spoken them aloud.

"You would be dooming us." Father intones, as if this somehow falls on Ranboo's shoulders, *his fault that End crystals can be fabricated, his fault this has been hidden from the empire rule number one never hide things from your emperor imagine the fallout if that information gets leaked*, and it's *always* like this with father, one manipulation tactic after another.

But Ranboo *won't* take the blame for this, *the guilt*, would've been content to live and let live, *but then they got shot down his cariad was arrested all bets are off*, and that's the *only* reason he's back here now threatening to expose this information, because his father doesn't know when to *concede defeat*.

"No, *you* would." Ranboo seethes, mind extrapolating the situation out for him, knows that it would drive Annwyl into financial destitution, *if* Nirox didn't wipe them out of existence for high treason, and father's brows draw down over his stormy eyes, "We'll destroy the files before you could ever get to them, there would be nothing to validate your claims."

Ranboo scoffs, rolls his eyes because he remembers *every* detailed report explaining the process, diagrams and schematics for equipment that would be easy to build, that would be easy for Nirox to mass produce, *completely erode Annwyl's prominent standing in the empire*, "I have an eidetic memory you know, I remember *everything*. I'll go straight to the emperor and copy it over *perfectly*. You won't be able to stop them."

"You would seriously betray your own people, your own planet? And for what? One lone little criminal? A band of *thugs*?" Father spits that last word out, rolling off his tongue like *poison*, like something dirty and foul *and beneath him*, and Ranboo bristles, jaw working back and forth while he tries to calm down, *so close* to launching himself across the room and *tearing that bastard's throat out don't say that don't you EVER-*

"Ranboo, have you seen yourself recently? All the damage that's been done to you?" Father coaxes, attempting to switch tactics as he gestures at Ranboo's scarred hands, the craggily stump sticking out of his hair, *trying to turn him against the Syndicate trying to shift blame sow doubt resentment paranoia*, "Why remain loyal to an institution that only causes you pain? That's hurt you? It's...*madness it's-*"

*Black tiles black walls black blood crying screaming crushing loneliness I'll do what you want only wanted to make you proud never cared never was here only causes you pain this place it's this place this hell hole this fucking family these fucking people it's them it's HIM-*

"You've got to be fucking joking, right? *RIGHT?*" Ranboo yells and when it's obvious father *isn't* joking, *meant that to be serious*, he tips his head back and *cackles*, "Oh Ancients, you're insane, you're actually *insane*- what the *FUCK* is wrong with you!"

"I-"

“No! NO! You shut up for once in your *void cursed life and LISTEN to ME!*” He roars, cutting a hand violently through the air, *sit down shut up I’m right you’re wrong no use arguing*, “You have *no right* to act like you have *any* say in my life! N-Not after how I was raised, not after you got us shot *down! Not after you had my cariad ARRESTED!*”

It’s *incredible to yell at him*, to look him straight in the eyes and vent all the hurt and fury that’s been eating away at his core, list it all out and hurl it back in his impassive face. Ranboo has thought about it before, late at night when he couldn’t sleep, imagined spilling every nasty thing burning up his insides, wondered what kind of reaction he’d get, *anything something finally a crumb*.

And maybe he’d thought about it too much, had built it up in his head to be this grand confrontation, *screaming yelling finally winning*, so maybe it *was* stupid, but he’d been hoping for *something more* besides father scoffing, “Don’t be ridiculous, that boy is not your caria-”

His words cut off in a startled choke as Ranboo fists two hands in the front of his robes and slams him into the nearest wall, *furious and hurt and he’s never once cared who are you again*, snarling, “Shut *UP! SHUT UP!* Y-You don’t know *shit!* How DARE you! Say whatever about *me*, but don’t you *dare* belittle what we have!”

Father’s eyes flick to the side, where Ranboo’s braid hangs down near his shoulder, slitted pupils raking over the even plaits, *done with care done by hands that understand what they’re doing*, brows scrunching together minutely seeing the bead at the end, *one he doesn’t recognize but knows what it means I’m yours you’re mine and we are each other’s-*

“I’m only going to say this *once*.” Ranboo seethes, leaning in and is gratified to see he’s the same height as his father, *no way for him to loom over you can’t make you feel small out of control now you’re in control*, “Either have Tubbo released from prison, or I’m going to hand over *every* document on End crystal fabrication to Nirox.”

“You’re serious.” Father murmurs, still staring at the shining plastisteel bead slipped over Ranboo’s hair, and *why won’t he look at you never looks at you pay attention to me I’m right here I’m RIGHT HERE-*

“Of course I am! You crossed a line you *fucking bitch* and I have no *qualms ove-!*”

“No I- I meant you’re serious about being cariards, about...about that boy being your husband.” And father looks back at him and something unpleasant squirms around in Ranboo’s chest because it’s- *nothing in his eyes hollow stare house with the lights out how did you handle it when mom I didn’t*, and his hands start to shake.

Ranboo lets go before father can notice and latch onto it, *try to pick him apart*, steps back quickly and rubs his scarred fingers together, glaring from under hooded eyes, “Of course he is! W-Why would I lie about this? *Yes I’m serious*, you stupid dick-!”

“I didn’t know. I...why didn’t you *say anything?*” Father says, stays pressed up against the wall where Ranboo left him, and throwing both his hands around, Ranboo shouts, “*Why*

would I *ever* tell you *anything*? I *left*! I-I was trying to get away from you assholes but y-you *wouldn't leave me alone-!*"

"We're your *family*-"

"No you are NOT! F-Family is supposed to *care for you*! T-They're supposed to s-support you a-and treat you well!" Ranboo braces a hand against his chest and flings the other out, thinks about a warm sunny little kitchen and four arms hugging him tight, *brilliant smiles welcoming arms gentle summer winds*, knows now he never belonged in this cold frozen place, "All you've ever done is *ignore me*! A-Abuse me! L-Lock me up in empty rooms a-and try and *pretend I wasn't there*!"

His eyes have started stinging, chest constricting tight around the sobs that are building, *growing tall in the sky like banks of black sand clouds ready to come rushing out of the wastes blast everything to shreds*, and Ranboo shakes his head, *refuses* to let himself cry over *these horrible people*.

"T-The only thing I *e-ever wanted* was for you to care for me, t-to be *proud of me*!" *Fuck*, his voice just cracked, deep breathes just take deep breathes, but it's all coming bubbling out, *doors off their hinges letting everything out going to let it all come to the surface good it needs to*, and he snuffles, "B-But you c-couldn't even r- r-remember my *n-name*! You didn't e-even *c-care that I was here- you d-didn't even care I A-ALMOST DIED*!"

"W-What? I...that's not-" Father trails off, brings one hand up to knead at his temple, eyes unseeing as they stare at the floor like he's working back through his memory, *like he's trying to figure out what Ranboo's talking about*, "I-I never would've let you hurt each other that badly I- I made sure you were *safe, all of you*."

And oh Ancients, there's only one thing he could be referring to and somewhere Ranboo had *hoped* he just didn't know, but he knew, *he knew what all of you were doing*, knew about the cobras in your bed and the daggers at your back, *and he never did anything he let all of you torture and abuse each other for years made sure you were safe how is that safe how is THAT-*

"*Safe*? S-SAFE! Oh fuck OFF! Ritkik used to slip *venomous snakes in my bed*! Taysen's arm got broken, Mirtei was *hospitalized for a week*- Zethir and Reshaa nearly *k-killed* each other when I was *thirteen*! I-I nearly *killed M-MYSELF*!" Ranboo howls and he's hardly ever said it in such plain terms, digs trembling fingertips into the skin over where his heart rests, finds solace in each beat, *love you love you love you*, "I-I threw myself off the *fucking roof*! A-And none of you *e-ever said ANYTHING*! Y-You never even *n-noticed*!"

That was always the worst part, the fear that the specters were right, that it really didn't matter what happened to him, *that no one cared even a little*, and sitting down to breakfast the next morning with no one saying a word felt like it just confirmed all his worst fears.

"I was *drowning*." Ranboo chokes out, voice gone wrong with the tripping exhales that rattle in his throat, sniffs hard, trying to find some *shred* of humanity in this statue his father's become, "I w-was *dying*, c-couldn't keep my h-head above water a-and you *never c-cared*-you...y-you've n-never cared about me, so I just...*I-I don't understand*."

Ranboo's full on crying now, and he's ashamed he broke so easily, flicks his eyes to the side and clasps shaking hands around the back of his neck, thumbs stroking gentle shapes where it dips into his shoulders, "W-Why did you t-try so h-hard to g-get me b-back? I- I-I don't u-understand! Y-You don't c-care for m-me, I-I'm last of *eight*, not e-even a *spare*...I'm n-nothing to you I...I know y-you never *wanted me*."

*Who are you again last in line last one on his mind waves you off whenever you tried to talk with him sets you down sets you aside like he can't be bothered like it's a waste of his time like you are-*

"S-So w-why? Why did y-you do a-all this?" Ranboo cries, and shudders hard remembering desperate sobs in the night from burns he can't soothe, coming awake terrified out of his mind, *scars up to his wrists shake in his hands watching his husband get arrest drug off people he cares for so deeply hurt threatened not safe*, lower lip trembling, "W-What did I e-ever do to you? I-I o-only want to be a-a good son I- I-I don't know w-why y-you h-hate me."

It echoes out into a frozen silence, only broken by the hiccupping noises Ranboo's trying to muffle. He unlaces his fingers and scratches through the hair at the back of his head, pretending they're fire bright hands, *wishing there was another set cupping your face so warm so warm all the time bead winking in the morning sun maroso husband love of my life and you're mine love you sunshine love you so much and he's gone they took him you didn't prote-*

"Do you know where your name comes from?"

Lifting his head slowly, Ranboo flicks suspicious eyes to his father, and he hasn't moved, looks like he hasn't even *twitched* a muscle, but Ranboo sucks in a startled breath because *oh holy shit his eyes-*

"I picked it." There's such unimaginable sorrow in their depths it might as well be a death, *shell of a thing no lights on inside how did you handle it I didn't*, absolute soul sucking misery *how is he even still on his feet how is he even still alive is he is this life*, "I...I wanted to name you."

*I wanted you*, is what's there underneath his words when Ranboo looks, feels like he's been slapped across the face, sharp stinging crack that renders him mute and *terrified*. There's... there's no way he's telling the truth, this is some sort of trick, *a new angle he's working trying to manipulate you prey on your feelings he's not he didn't-*

"You were so small when you were born, had the worst habit of yanking on braids. Ett- y-your mother um, s-she had to keep hers pinned back for the first year." Father wheezes, sounds like he's reading a eulogy, more emotion in the shivery cadence to his voice than Ranboo's *ever heard*, "You used to try and pull the gems out of my crown when you were teething...sawed through a dozen pacifiers. D-Drove the nannies *mad-*"

"W-Why are you t-telling me this?" Ranboo pleads, trying to figure out what the point is, *where the lie is*, but for everything he's been taught, all the ways he knows how to read people and worm into their heads, *he can't find the lie can't find where the charade starts*

worries it might be the truth- “I- after *e-everything*- y-you can’t just *s-say that!* Y-You can’t *p-pretend like you’re my f-father!*”

And father has barely *said* anything, relies on hidden meanings and understanding being passed on through empty words. He has never and *will never* directly come out and say the words Ranboo has been starving for his entire life, *I care for you*, will skirt around the subject without ever really addressing it, *shadow on the wall something’s there*, but it’s not *enough*.

Maybe it would’ve been in the past, the briefest glimmer of care and compassion, but Ranboo needs *more*, has *gotten more*. He *needs* gentle touches spreading across his back tweaking at his nose *my baby my littlest always cared for you*, warm arms wrapping him up tight and *so proud so brave you’re my son have a place with me with us*, large hand on his shoulder *quite the aim honestly amazing looks at you like he’s proud of you like you’re worth something-*

It’s taken Ranboo a long time, but he’s finally found people that will give him the care and support he needs, enjoy his company for what it is, *enjoy him for who he is*. And maybe this is what healing really is, the realization that he doesn’t have to settle for things that don’t benefit him, that have hurt him and probably will continue to do so, and it feels like a massive weight is suddenly gone from around his shoulders.

“You have *f-failed me* in all the ways a parent could *p-possibly* fail their child.” Ranboo hiccups but his voice is steady, remembers to hold his spine straight, and it’s not because he’s afraid of being seen as weak, it’s because he knows he’s strong, “Nothing you could say will *e-ever* make up for that, it- i-it doesn’t *change a-anything!*”

And out of all the things he could say, *scathing and terrible knows how to take people apart better than you*, the manipulation tactics he breathes like you breathe air, *suspicious and paranoia straight from birth never turn your back mold people to get what you want*, all father does is stare at him with his dead hollow eyes, whispers softly, “I know.”

He finally moves then, grinding to life like he’s trying to remember how to make his joints work, and Ranboo watches him stride past with a deep wariness, sees *something* bleed out of him as he goes to the head of the table. Father starts tapping at one of the consoles, back to Ranboo so it’s hard to see what he’s doing, and before he can demand an answer, father says, “I accept your terms.”

Ranboo’s so floored, his jaw actually drops open, figured he was going to have to needle and threaten a lot more than he did, and while he’s struggling to find words, father keeps going in that tone he uses for meetings, official dealings, the one that lacks all emotion, “In exchange for keeping Raennaron a secret, I’ll have Underscore released from prison with a full pardon.”

“I- *w-what?*” Ranboo stammers, head reeling because all he bargained for was Tubbo’s *release*, and a full pardon is- *it’s warrants dropped*, it’s a record wiped clean, *no soot no fuel smudges nothing hanging over his head he’d be free he’d finally be free*. There’s *no way*, father has to be...lying, bluffing somehow *for some reason why would he doesn’t make any sense*, because Ranboo thought only the emperor had that kind of jurisdiction, “I just- *c-can you even do that?*”



It's so brief, hardly counts as anything, but for a second, father turns his head just slightly, *barest snatch of a cheek lifted in a sardonic smirk edges of a searing green eye crinkled it's just a formality*, but it's over before it began and Ranboo's not sure it even happened. "It's already been done. Now you better be going, Deosorum is a good few hours from here." Father says without inflection, still with his back to Ranboo, but for some reason, the gesture doesn't read as dismissive, it seems like it's defensive more than anything.

Like...it's for his sake, *like he's trying to hide*.

"That's...it? You're just going to let me leave." Ranboo questions and nervously rocks up onto his toes, half of him *so desperate to be out of here to go he said you could go*, but the rest lags behind, trying to make sure the way forward is safe, that there's no hidden traps he needs to be mindful of.

"There's no point forcing you to stay somewhere you do not wish to be." Father answers inflectionless, or, he tries to, but there's something in his voice, *think you hear crying on the edge of sleep shouldn't be out here alone get some rest*, and Ranboo's heart lurches against his will, "But I-"

"Our paths have run parallel through the years, but at this last divide, there is no other course besides the final farewell." Father recites and Ranboo stumbles to a stop because that's only ever said at funerals, when soldiers are leaving for the frontlines, a farewell that is only ever uttered when you know without a shadow of a doubt you're never seeing that person ever again.

*He's...telling me goodbye letting me go is he...trying to apologize*, Ranboo thinks like the slow slide of sunlight outside big windows, swallows hard and hates the brief disappointment that flares bright under his sternum, doesn't *want* words he has to find for himself, wants to hear *I'm sorry* spoken aloud.

But he's not going to, *knows* he's never going to get the kind of verbal affirmations here like he's grown to realize it's okay to ask for, knows now that it's okay to admit you need to hear things spoken plainly. That's not Voidfall and that's not the people that raised him though, it's never going to be, because if a prince isn't supposed to apologize, what's a *king* supposed to do?

*Speak in half-truths and none at all leave you to try and figure it out piece it together understand what he means but this is it then this...really is the end then.*

A part of Ranboo doesn't want this to be the end, and he's *disgusted with it*, but it argues that it shouldn't be over that he *has to care tried so hard to get you back that's your father*; but everything else knows it's time to go, that in this instance, it's better to say goodbye.

"I'm never coming back...you're never going to see me again." Ranboo hedges, starting to slide backwards on the balls of his feet, one step back and then another, finally moving away from the thing that's never been good for him, finally moving on, *finally letting go*.

"I hadn't counted on it." And that's his *father* saying that, *bags under his eyes fingers under yours have you been sleeping no rest for men like me*, but then something settles across his

shoulders and when he turns around, it's one of the statues from outside the palace, *one of the Forefathers a dead lifeless thing*, telling him, "Safe travels, may the Four Celestials light your path."

And it's uncomfortably familiar because it's like looking at himself, *distorted blurry image in a mirror but it's me and I'm you*, and it's not a perfect match, there's enough differences to know he's his own person, but watching masks come up expressions slip away, all Ranboo can think about is how that was hammered into his head, wonders who hammered it into *theirs*.

He sat and learned at the feet of people who once had to have been in his spot, *small and weak and too wide eyed*, who had someone before them teach the words that they then seared into his brain, all one hundred lessons passed down from parent to child like the most horrible of inheritances, *a generational curse*.

It's not an excuse, *it's never going to be an excuse*, there's not enough words in any language to excuse the things that go on behind Voidfall's abyssal walls, but it's an explanation, and it might not be one Ranboo wants, but it's the one he's got. He's never going to forgive them, *can't*, knows he deserves better than that, but as the Eshachi rises up out of Annwyl's bleak atmosphere, breaks free into the welcoming arms of the cosmos, he thinks he understands.

And wrapping a hand around the throttle, about to send himself streaking forwards into lightspeed, *away* from all of this *finally*, leaving behind hollow green eyes and wicked sharp nails, heading towards the better future he's going to build, that *they're* going to build together, *hand in hand side by side forever*, Ranboo knows he can make peace with that.

Thinks that curse might've skipped a generation anyway.

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### **Lesson One Hundred: You exist in ~~service to your family~~ and what a joy that is**

There's not a single cloud in the vivid blue sky overhead, never is during the summer on Apidae, and Ranboo's seriously regretting not pulling his hair back into a bun today, keeps flicking it off the back of his neck where it rests hot and heavy.

He's taking a breather before they haul the next support post into place, stands leaning up against the two that'll flank where the front door goes and eyes the space he has for a garden out front. Cissan doesn't have much of a green thumb, *four thumbs and I don't even have one hijo*, but her sister Giulia does, seems like she can make anything grow with a single cluck of her tongue.

*It's all about listening for what they need amorito*, she tells him where he's following after her heels in a garden that's flourishing beautifully in the warming spring air, *sure there's technique and knowledge but that's not what matters most*, her hands are gentle where they turn stalks around, prune back sick leaves and flick off pesky insects, touching everything with such reverence, *care for it and the land will care for you in return it's a beautiful cycle melli*.

Most of the spring was spent helping Giulia in her garden and learning the songs she sang while she worked, coming to understand how everything *breathed* together, about finding joy in such small, simple things, like little lime green seedlings poking up through the soil and earth under his bare toes.

*Life is a beautiful thing*, Ranboo thinks with a contented sigh, slipping his eyes closed as a sticky breeze ruffles past, tangling the long mess of his ponytail and sets his braid swinging gently. “Oi! If you’re done with your *fainting spell* come help me with this bitch. It’s hot as *shitting balls* and I want to be done *yesterday*.” Snaps behind him in aggressive fondness, and Ranboo turns with a snort, pushing his sunglasses up from where they’d slipped down as he fires back, “You are *such* a crybaby, the smallest little whiner of a thing.”

“I am the biggest man *ever*, so shut your stupid fucking mouth.” Tommy grouches but he’s grinning while he says it, one leg propped up on the next post they’re supposed to fit into place, raps a ratty sneaker into it for emphasis, “Come on, hup to! ‘Fore my *brains* melt out my ears.”

“Now Tommy, that’s just not realistic.” Ranboo sighs in mock admonishment, shakes his head as if he’s a teacher kindly correcting a wayward student, but then when he gets closer, his smile goes a little sharp and he coos, “You’d have to *have* a brain first before it’d melt.”

Tommy lets out a loud bark of laughter, wings flapping open behind him and kicking up a brief swirl of wind, and he rams into Ranboo’s shoulder, jostling him a bit as he cackles, “You *fucking dick!*”

The posts are a good fair bit taller than Ranboo, have to be so he won’t crack his forehead on the beams that’ll span between them, but he and Tommy have gotten a system worked out. They get a line secured to the top of one, Tommy crouched down muttering under his breath that the navy has to be good for *something* as he loops coils of rope around, popping to his feet with a cheery, “Everything looks to be in top shape sir dick-wiener, sir!”

“At ease, lieutenant ass-munch.” Ranboo responds with ease, not bothering to fight his smile as Tommy snickers, gets in place to be able to grab the post once it’s up and nods to let him know he’s ready. Tommy takes the end of the rope and with a big gust of air, snaps his wings down, propels himself up into the sky as he hauls the post up with him, and Ranboo grabs it around the middle, guiding it into its spot in the floor.

It slides down easily, perfectly cut so it matches up with the hole seamlessly, and for added security, but more likely because he just enjoys doing it, Tommy lands on the top with a loud *thuwmp* that drives it down further. They’ve been at it most of the morning, taking advantage of the extra set of hands while they can, and Ranboo’s pleased with how much they’ve managed to get done.

Most of the posts are up now, he and Tommy just have a few more to get through and then they can start on framing out the roof supports, which, that’ll probably be an *after* lunch project given how miserably sweaty Tommy looks and how lightheaded Ranboo is.

And as if on cue, there’s a loud whistle right as they’re working the last post into place, and Ranboo excitedly lets go before Tommy hits the top of it, sends him tumbling off the top in a

shrieking mess of spastic wings.

Ranboo knows he's fine despite the loud protests at his back claiming otherwise, doesn't care right now anyway because there, standing in the middle of the house smiling at him, is Tubbo. Half his hair's pulled back in a fluffy little ponytail, cariad braid hanging free behind his ear, dusty pair of overalls with patches on the knees and a whole ring of tools clipped onto a beltloop and he's never looked lovelier.

Bounding across the cement foundation of the house, Ranboo scoops him up into a hug, spinning them both around wildly, and feels Tubbo's wings flare out excitedly. Tubbo laughs loud and delighted, arms going over the back of Ranboo's neck as he knocks their foreheads together, antennae flicking out while he sings, "Ciao, stelle!"

"Pomeriggio, heulwen." Ranboo says happily, headbutting him softly and Tubbo giggles, bonks him back a few times, actual sunlight in his smile when he says, "You hungry? I brought lunch."

"Starving." Ranboo smiles back as he lets Tubbo drop to his feet, catches something flashing in the light and reaches out, flicking a claw against one of the earrings Tubbo's wearing, "Hey, you're not supposed to have these on for *two more days*, mister."

"Oh piss off! What are you, *the marriage police*?" Tubbo laughs, eyes crinkling up dimples in his cheeks, *loveliest thing you've ever seen*, and he shakes his head to dislodge Ranboo's hand, sets the earrings and his braid swinging, "Need I remind you we're *already married*? This is just like...extra marriage, *bonus* marriage."

The laugh that comes bubbling up out of Ranboo's chest is heartachingly lovely, airy and happy and *filled with so many wonderful hopeful things*, and he cups Tubbo's cheek, thumb dragging across smooth skin and shiny scar tissue, "Oh yes, can't wait to stand up at the altar and ask for your hand in double triple extracurricular marriage."

"Dunno, sounds pretty good to me, marosito." Tubbo grins smugly, nuzzling into Ranboo's palm because he *knows* how much Ranboo likes that nickname, *hubby*, so simple so sweet, melts his heart right out of his chest every single time he hears it. Which is *entirely* unfair, and something Tubbo has used to his advantage *many times* in his quest to get his way, leaves Ranboo fuzzy and stupid and willing to agree to most anything.

Before he can respond with something that's equally as endearing and affectionate, there's a too loud voice knocking them back into reality, "Oh wow! Look! *Tommy's still here*. Tommy is *still here* and is *being subjected*- which is a right dick move fuck you in advance- and is being subjected to *this MUSH* fest, all while being *forced* to do manual labor and-!"

"Fuck you, dickhead! You refused to get us a wedding present so this is your penance." Tubbo declares loftily, only stepping back enough so he can twist and cock an eyebrow at where Tommy's sputtering, wings flaring out, "Wha-! I- you-! I-I *asked you* a-and all *YOU* would tell me was *to steal you an End crystal reactor*-!"

"Which is a very reasonable requ-"

“NO, it is *NOT!*” Tommy howls and throws both his hands in the air, drops them back down not a second later to gesture at them empathically, wings flapping behind him in theatrics, “First time I get shore leave in *years*, and I’m drug out to *fucking*- hot as *balls Nowheresville!* Shanghaied into *building you a house!* All while you make *gooey eyes* an’ hang off *king* mush ball over there!”

It’s been a more regular thing for a few months now, all spending time together like this, and Ranboo was nervous out of his mind meeting Tommy for the first time, felt like he barely knew the guy, but he really shouldn’t have worried. Being around Tommy is one of the easiest things, he’s wicked sharp and unfairly hilarious, is good at bouncing off a variety of people so there’s never a dull moment, and the way he and Tubbo interact is *utterly* fascinating.

Their relationship is very bizarre, it’s one of the most well-meaning, deeply caring, *highly aggressive* friendships Ranboo’s ever seen, seems like they do more heckling and yelling than anything else, but if you actually listen to what they’re saying, there’s no denying how much they mean to one another.

“You’re just *jealous* you don’t have anyone to be a mush ball with.” Tubbo crows, hooks two arms around Ranboo’s waist and drags them closer together, and Ranboo swings his tail up, settles it in its customary place across the small of Tubbo’s back, grins when he feels fingers stroke along his side adoringly.

“Not true! I’ll have you know, *Tube-o*, but I turned down a date with a *very* attractive woman to come to this *stupid* thing.” Tommy lies so obviously, Ranboo doesn’t know who he thinks he’s fooling, watches as one of his hands comes up to cup his chin, grinning in what he probably assumes is a *suave* and *dashing* way, “I’m the hottest commodity back on Nirox- I- IN the *entire FLEET!* I’m *drowning* in women, Tubs.”

And Ranboo’s new to their well-established dynamic, has been a little afraid of stepping on toes, but he feels like he’s finally hit some solid ground, shitty grin already tugging his lips up as he exclaims excitedly, “Oh wow! I didn’t know you could drown in the *absence* of something!”

Tubbo laughs so hard he snorts, is practically doubled over, hands batting at Ranboo desperately while he wheezes, and there is no greater feeling in the entire world than knowing he can bring his cariad that much joy. *Love you love you so much*, Ranboo thinks helplessly, swaying closer, and Tubbo looks up at him, giddy tears springing to his eyes, cheeks and tip of his nose a light pink, and it’s never been clearer that *he loves you too my cariad my sunshine my husband my forever and he loves me*.

“Ugh! You two are *actually* the *worst!*” Tommy groans but he’s laughing too, and maybe it’s not so hard knowing what to say to him, nothing in his eyes but overwhelming affection and the deepest devotion as he gripes, “Shit stains and assholes the both of you, absolutely *terrible*, you’re perfect for one another.”

*We are aren’t we*, Ranboo thinks walking up the hill they’re building their house into, Tubbo’s right arms wrapped around his left, picnic basket in his free hand and Tommy

animatedly telling some story while he walks backwards ahead of them, warm contentment melting through his chest as Tubbo drags fingers lovingly across his arm.

And it's perfect not in the sense that they're flawless, far from it, there's too many cracks and dips and rough edges, but somehow, *someway*, they fit neatly together, two little puzzle pieces that've never belonged anywhere else, have only ever been meant to slot next to one another, doesn't matter if they make a coherent picture or not.

The three of them flop down under the shade of a massive tree crowning the hill, Tubbo pulling out the containers of chilled pasta Cissan made the day before, fresh summer berries Ranboo could eat entire fistfuls of, and thermoses of sweet, iced fruit tea that hit the spot like nothing else ever has. They eat and crack horrible jokes, tell stories and kick at one another, Tubbo drops his head to rest on Ranboo's shoulder, and Ranboo props his chin up in between his antennae, grinning at some dumb thing Tommy's telling him.

Below them, rolling out like the most beautiful of paintings is Apidae, all warm hues and verdant greens, yellowed grasses waving in the sweet wind that sails down over the hill, tangling through Ranboo's hair and tugging at it softly, *set of fingers tweaking at his nose pulling gently on an ear hello darling*.

*Hi mama*, he whispers back and she smiles at him through the sunlight that filters down through the leaves, sends dappled patterns racing across the backs of his hands, dancing over skin that's as speckled and mottled as the sweeping arm of a galaxy. Ranboo takes a deep breath and loves the way his chest expands with it, lets it go and watches how it ruffles Tubbo's hair, shorter strands slipping free and hanging down into his laughing dark eyes.

"I love you." Ranboo murmurs in a quiet moment, all of them dozing a little in the heat of the afternoon, bugs singing around them like the rise and fall of engines at full warp, and Tubbo sleepily snuffles into his shoulder, laces their fingers together and whispers, "I love you too."

And he means it, means it like Ranboo's wanted him to mean it for so long, enough so that they're going to stand before the community in a few days and have their clasped hands bound together in colorful ribbons. *It's kinda funny actually*, the memory of Tubbo tells him where they're out on Cissan's front porch, early morning quiet and soft, dewy with a refreshing chill, *but it's pretty similar to the hair braiding ceremony*, and Tubbo's hair is always a huge mess in the mornings, but his braid never is, is pristine and well taken care of, clearly loved, just like Ranboo's, *guess we're not that different after all*.

Ranboo huffs once in breathy amusement, head really starting to loll to the side as he nods off, pleasant, rewarding ache in his muscles from a morning of hard work, pulse even and low, matching the slow beat of the world around him. It's been nice being on leave, *personal leave this time not medical a choice it was their choice this time*, has given Ranboo a glimpse into what their future looks like, *quiet mornings and slow soft flow of life finally calm finally some peace*.

They'll keep flying for the Syndicate for a little while longer, call of the stars burning so brightly in both of them it's impossible to ignore, but they'll be coming back here at the end of the day, landing the Eshachi in the hangar Tubbo is building, walk back to their home on a red dirt road hand in hand.

Techno was surprisingly fine with the whole arrangement, acted tough about it up front, jokingly demanded an invitation to the wedding and extra cake as recompense, and then almost cried when Tubbo told him, “Like we weren’t going to invite you anyway, bossman.”

As far as Ranboo’s ever seen, Techno’s only ever cried once, and that was when he met them in hangar six after Ranboo got Tubbo back from Deosorum, crushed Tubbo in a hug so tight something popped in his back, slapped Ranboo upside the back of the head before dragging him down as well. “You are the two *stupidest* sons of bitches in all of creation.” He’d sniffled, shaking hand on the back of Ranboo’s head betraying how *scared* he actually was, but it started to relax the longer he hung onto them both.

*Bet he’ll cry at the ceremony*, Ranboo thinks giddy on the edge of sleep, slowly sliding down into it with hazy, half formed ideas and plans flickering at the edges of his mind. There’s still so much he wants to get done, *that he has ahead of him*, plans and ideas that stretch out before him over the course of many years, and he’s looking forward to all of it.

There’s a long list of planets he wants to visit, things he wants to see, plants he wants to grow and take care of, thinks he and Tubbo might be able to reverse engineer Raennaron themselves, make their ship the most beautiful, fastest flying thing in existence, teal startrials burning long after her as she cuts through the cosmos like a *comet*.

But for right now, he’s sleepy, weighed down by a good kind of exhaustion and a belly full of food, his cariad pressed up against his side, soft exhales hitting the side of his neck, someone who he thinks is becoming one of his best friends dozing not that far off. Ranboo sighs, settling back, eyes slipping closed on his home, this place he loves as assuredly as the stars, *as himself*, and presses a free hand into the earth, really, *genuinely* happy he’s alive.

**You are a good person you deserve to be loved, to be cared for, you deserve to be happy**

## Chapter End Notes

And here’s the end of our road, I hope you’ve enjoyed the journey. This has been an actual wild ride for me, somewhere in the middle of writing this I suddenly got popular very quickly and it’s been an interesting experience. I’ve met so many new people because of it, had some really good laughs and seen some truly amazing art that y’all’ve made because of me and my story. It’s wild. I’ve been told I’m an inspiration, that people aspire to be like me, that my works have brought them comfort and solace and it means more than you could ever possibly know.

Sure it’s not all been great, I don’t talk about my feelings much and there’s no need to focus on negativity, but I will at least say this. I’m proud of myself. Parts of this have been absolute shit and drug me down in the worst way, but ever the most stubborn thing to exist, I bulled through it. I have my friends and family to thank for that, for encouraging me and helping me get through everything, I wouldn’t have been able to do this without you.

I know De Terra isn't everyone's cup of tea.

It's dark, it's upsetting, it takes a real hard look at a lot of horrible things but if that's all you're getting out of it, you've quite frankly missed the point. This is a story about healing, and it's not easy, it's not pretty, it's messy and hard but it's so worth it in the end, because there is light at the end of the tunnel, there is a sunrise waiting for you at the end of the night.

This story is a love letter to myself, to anyone that's struggling through things of their own right now, I hope you understood what I'm trying to tell you, I hope I understand it one day too. Life can be incredibly painful, but it can also be incredibly beautiful, and all we have to get through it are each other, so be kind, be loving, because at the end of the day, that's all we have, and it has to count for something.

See you on the other side,

Hellen <3



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